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Bison Bill, The Prince of the Reins; or, The Red Riders of the Overland.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

AUTHOR OF "THE HUSSAR CAPTAIN," "THE SEA DEVIL," "DICK DEAD-EYE," "THE BOY DUELIST," ETC., ETC.



ON THE BOX SAT BISON BILL, GUIDING THE TEAM DOWN THE FEARFUL STEEP.

Buffalo Bill as Overland Stage-Driver.

Bison Bill,

The Prince of the Reins;

OR,

The Red Riders of the Overland.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "THE SEA DEVIL," "DICK DEAD-
EYE," "THE BOY DUELIST," "LITTLE
GRIT," "GOLD PLUME," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.
MET BY CHANCE.

A WILD scene amid the mountains of the Gold State, and the landscape unbroken by a single habitation.

An eagle soaring high in the heavens, a squirrel bounding from limb to limb of a nut tree, and a bird trilling forth notes of beauty, were the only objects visible to the eye, in this far-away land of California, whose rich earth was yielding up its yellow treasures to the hardy and industrious miners, who had given up home and comforts to dig a fortune with pick and shovel.

Suddenly another object caught the eye, coming out of the thicket on the mountain-side, and moving downward toward the valley.

A close look and it was seen to be the form of a man, with pick and shovel on one shoulder and rifle on the other, and a face bronzed by exposure and furrowed by hardship.

Dressed in the top-boots, dark pants and blue woolen shirt of a miner, his rough garb did not hide the nobility of face, and the intellectual and brilliant eyes, that had evidently in the past gazed upon far different scenes from that which they then beheld.

With a swift, firm tread he came down the mountain, following an almost unbroken path, and then, as his eyes fell upon the sunset beauties over the hill-tops, he paused, dropped his shovel and pick, and leaning upon his rifle, gazed upon the grand scene spread out before his vision.

Absorbed in the loveliness of nature, tinged with the sunset glory, he failed to observe that a form had suddenly emerged from the shadows of the trees that bordered the stream, running through the valley, and was advancing toward him.

It was also the form of a man, carrying the tools of a miner, a rifle, and a large bundle swung to his pack.

With apparently tired step he ascended the hill, and had approached within fifteen paces of the other before he saw him.

Instantly he dropped his tools, threw forward his rifle, and said quickly:

"Well, sir, are you friend or foe?"

The falling of the tools had aroused the other from his sunset reverie, and he had quickly grasped his rifle for use; but perceiving that the other had "the drop on him," he gazed at his face and made no sign to raise the weapon to fire.

Thus the two men stood an instant, and again came the question:

"Are you friend or foe? Say quick! for these are dangerous times, partner."

Then came the answer calm and stern:

"There was a time, Hugh Arleigh, when you and I were friends, and then enmity came between us; but meeting here now in this far-away land, I say let us bury the hatchet."

"Burt Bernard!" gasped the other, his face paling.

"Yes, I am Burt Bernard, your old-time boyhood friend and rival; you won the prize and both strove hard to gain, poor Helen Tracey, and for a while life seemed a happy dream to you."

"But she is dead now, and adversity has fallen upon you and me, Hugh, and we meet here in the gold mountains, and as miners."

"My cabin lies yonder in the valley, and I say, share it with me and let us be friends, for the sake of her we both loved so."

The bronzed-faced miner stepped forward as he spoke, and stretched forth his hand, and Hugh Arleigh sprung to meet him eagerly, and said earnestly:

"Indeed will I, Burt, bury the past in the grave of forgetfulness and be your friend."

"I knew that financial troubles had fallen upon you, and they said you had disappeared, none knew where."

"Shortly after, I failed, and the gold-fields lured me hither to search for gold, to once

more give me wealth and position, and I have been here but a few weeks, searching the mountains for a claim."

"And I have been here two years, and ill-luck has dogged my steps, for little have I made."

"But come, yonder cabin, you can just see it in the valley, is my home, and I am alone, but I have plenty to eat and to drink for an old friend, and we will toil on with renewed hope of success. Come."

Shouldering their tools and rifles, the two men, so strangely met after years of separation, who had been rivals in school, in boyhood games, and in love as they grew to manhood, walked briskly down the mountain-side, to the cabin in the shadow of the valley.

But better for them had they never again met on earth.

CHAPTER II.

TEMPTED.

A SHRIEK went up, loud, ringing, piercing, from a canyon in the mountains, and sent forth many an echo from the surrounding rocks.

A wild shriek it was, and in a man's voice.

And what could have wrung from a brave, strong man a cry that a lost spirit might utter on the very verge of perdition?

A woman, from terror, in anguish, might give vent to such a cry, but why a man?

One glance into the canyon, down into the depths of which the sunlight penetrated sparingly through the dense foliage, and a man was visible in prostrate attitude.

He was a man of majestic presence, in spite of his rude miner's clothing, and he was bending over a hole in the side of the hill, from which his pick had just dragged forth a mass of shining ore.

For long days he had toiled and toiled, only occasionally turning up a little of the precious dust, and then, to suddenly, with one blow to reveal a fortune to his astonished, glaring, greedy eyes, it was more than his strung human nature could stand, and he broke forth with the wild shriek that went echoing through canyon and forest.

Like one demented he groveled in the dust that held the precious ore, laughing, talking, praying, and wild with delight, for back before his vision swept a future of luxury, even greater than what he had known in the past, ere his extravagant speculations had dragged him down to poverty, and sent him away to the mountain fastnesses to dig for gold, ay, to work for a subsistence.

Every now and then he would spring to his feet and seizing his pick strike it deep into the earth to again turn up the yellow metal, and again go mad with the gold fever that seized upon his delighted senses.

At last, realizing that night was coming on he gathered the dust together, filling his hat and large silk handkerchief, and started for his cabin.

Into a safe place he safely deposited the metal and then began to prepare his lonely supper, for his companion, Burt Bernard, with whom he had shared the cabin since their strange meeting a month before, had gone to the nearest mining camp for supplies, and would not return for several days, as it was a long trip across the mountains.

All through the night he lived over in dreams his rich find, and at dawn was up again, and breakfastless went to the lead he had struck.

Through the long day, with sweat on his brow like oil, he toiled and toiled, and each blow of the pick but increased his riches, until dark again hid the yellow metal from view.

Worn out, his excitement died away, and he went again to his cabin, tossed through the restless night, and a third day added to his riches by his tireless, incessant digging.

But at last human nature could stand no more, and the half-starved body, dragged down by fatigue and the excitement of his brain, brought on fever, and, barely able to crawl he crept to his cabin and sunk down upon his humble cot, hugging to his heart his yellow gold.

And thus, raging in delirium, Burt Bernard found him when he came in from his weary tramp, loaded down with provisions.

One glance told him all, and a bitter curse broke from his lips while he hissed forth:

"Here have I toiled for long and weary months, and I found no rich treasure like this, while you, Hugh Arleigh, but a few weeks here, have won a fortune, ay, the fortune of a millionaire, to judge from the dust you clutch so greedily to your heart."

"You won from me the woman I so madly loved, and now you have the treasure which

should have been mine—great God! why shall it not be mine?"

He turned pallid at the thought that flashed through his brain, and clasped his forehead in his hands.

Thus he stood, his eyes staring, his face white, and his form trembling.

At last he said in a tone almost inarticulate:

"Oh God! how I am tempted."

Again the moments passed slowly, and then he stepped forward and glanced at the fever-marked man, while he muttered:

"He may die, and then—No, no, no! I cannot do this crime," and his better nature triumphing, he bathed the face of his friend, gave him a cooling drink, and then sat down to ponder before the hearth.

With his head buried in his hands he long sat in deepest meditation, and then sprung to his feet with a wild cry, shouting:

"Ay, I have been tempted, and I have fallen."

Seizing the form of Hugh Arleigh in his strong arms, he bore him to the door and out into the fearful night, for a fierce storm was sweeping down the valley.

Before him the river, swollen into a foaming torrent, roared savagely, and to the high bank overhanging the seething waters he staggered with his human load.

No resistance came from the man he intended to kill, but instead a wild laughter and incoherent words.

Above his head he swung the form, and down, down into the flood it went, and was borne away upon the rushing waters, while, with a cry of terror, as the lightning flashed around him, Burt Bernard rushed back into his cabin, and sinking upon his bed, tried to shut out from his ears the angry roar of the thunder and the blinding glare that seemed to fill the hut as with a raging fire.

CHAPTER III.

LOST AND WON.

IN one of the most elegant gambling halls of San Francisco there entered a tall, finely-formed and heavily-bearded man, who after glancing around the brilliantly-lighted room, moved over to a faro-table, with the evident intention of playing.

He was evidently a man of wealth, refined in appearance, and elegantly dressed, though there was a certain nervousness about him that even to the casual observer indicated a restless nature, and one that sought excitement to drive away moody meditation.

"Do you play, sir?" asked the dealer, politely, seeing that he was a stranger, and several of the players glanced at him, while one whispered to a young army officer, who was looking on at the game:

"The bank will lose now, for that is Burt Bernard, the millionaire speculator, and his luck is proverbial."

The one spoken of overheard the remark, and having a passing acquaintance with the speaker, said, pleasantly:

"Good-evening, Mr. Doan; it is to see just how far my luck will go that I came here to-night to test it against a faro-bank."

"It will not desert you, doubtless, as I have heard your every investment proves a success," answered Doan.

"Yes; but we shall see how this one turns out: five thousand dollars' worth of chips, please, dealer," and all were surprised at the sum the millionaire ventured at once.

But the dealer handed over the "chips," took the money, and Burt Bernard laid the entire sum on one card and—lost.

He turned pale, yet kept perfectly calm, while the rumor going abroad that Burt Bernard, the millionaire miner, was gambling heavily and losing, those in different parts of the room crowded over to the faro-table, and became deeply interested spectators, for with every turn of the card the bank won.

Among those who came up to the table was a man of striking appearance, for he wore blonde side-whiskers and mustache, and his hair, almost flaxen, fell upon his shoulders, while his eyes were as black as night.

Flashily, though richly dressed, and wearing diamonds in profusion, he had been seen in the gambling saloon quite often of late, and sometimes he played, yet invariably lost.

Some said he was a cattle king, others, that he was a miner, and yet none seemed to know what was his name, or where his habitation.

Yes, there was one who knew; a dark-faced, evil-eyed Mexican who often was seen with him, and of whom as little was known as of the other.

For some moments he stood watching Burt Bernard lose, and then muttered aloud:

"At last his luck has changed; now it is my turn."

The young officer looked up at the speaker, for he heard his words; but he had turned suddenly and was leaving the room, and the next instant passed quickly out of the door.

Yet still, though losing heavily, Burt Bernard continued to play, until at last he muttered, as if to himself:

"If I lose more I will be unable to meet those payments to-morrow, and I will be ruined, for not a dollar can I get out of my other investments."

"But luck must change; I will try once more, and make the bet enough to sink or swim."

"Mr. Dealer, twenty thousand on this card, sir, and I will give you my check for it."

"Your check is good, sir—there, you have lost, Mr. Bernard."

Burt Bernard stood like one dazed, and each instant his face grew more pallid, and the expression on it was pitiful to behold.

And it drew pity from one, and that one was the young army officer, for he touched Burt Bernard on the arm, and said in a kindly tone:

"I seldom play, sir; but my luck is wonderful, so permit me to place your money if you bet more."

Catching at a straw, like a drowning man, Burt Bernard said eagerly:

"In investments I am largely interested, sir, but my money is tied up, so I can only risk a thousand, which I have here in my purse; play that for me, and play it to win, for the love of God!"

The crowd had seen the whispered conversation, but knew not what was being said, and the next moment Burt Bernard and the officer approached the faro-table together, and the latter said:

"Mr. Dealer, Mr. Bernard wishes me to play for him."

"So the money is put up, sir, it is immaterial to me," was the answer, and the officer threw five hundred upon a card.

"You have won, sir," said the dealer coolly.

"I make it a thousand," was the equally cool reply, and again the officer won.

And again a stake treble the amount was risked, and luck fell upon the soldier.

With a gripe of iron, so deep was his interest, Burt Bernard grasped the arm of the winner, and thus he stood until the officer asked quietly:

"How much did you lose, Mr. Bernard?"

"One hundred and fifteen thousand dollars."

"Here is that sum, sir; now let us retire."

Like one in a dream Burt Bernard turned away, grasping the huge roll of bills thrust into his hand, and the young officer accompanied him, the eyes of all following them, for where the one had steadily lost a fortune, the other had as steadily gained it back for him.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ASSASSIN.

UPON leaving the gambling hell Burt Bernard and his unknown army friend descended to the street together, when the latter said suddenly:

"I have left my cloak, sir, so shall return for it; good-night."

"Not so fast, my young friend, for I am not going to part thus with one who has saved my life," said Burt Bernard warmly.

"Nonsense, Mr. Bernard, I merely saved you some ready cash, that, had you lost, might have cramped you a little to-morrow," lightly replied the soldier.

"Young man, let me tell you the truth: I came to San Francisco with a large sum of gold, dug out of a mine, and I invested it, and all I went into increased my fortune."

"Of late I am tied up so by investments that the loss of this money would have wrecked me, while with it, I can carry along my risks for a few weeks and get out ahead."

"Had I lost it, I would not have had the courage to go East and face one whom I love better than life and I would have this night ended my days."

There was no doubting the words of the man, for his face showed it, and, it was seeing such wild determination in his face, that had caused the young officer to play for him, well knowing his invariable good luck, though seldom was it he ever gambled.

"Well, Mr. Bernard, I hope for the sake of the one you so dearly love, you will not gamble again, and I am glad to have been able to serve you," was the frank response.

"We must meet again and be friends; what is your name, please?"

"Edwin Arleigh, sir, a lieutenant in the army."

"Edwin Arleigh! Great God! are you the son of Hugh Arleigh and Helen Tracey?" and Burt Bernard covered his face with his hands, as if to shut out from his sight the face of the man before him.

"Yes: you knew my parents then?" said Lieutenant Arleigh, surprised at the feeling shown by his companion.

"Yes: your father was my boyhood friend: your mother I loved, and hoped to marry, but your father won her."

"Ah yes, I remember now having heard my parents speak of you, and I am delighted to meet their friend."

"Arleigh, we must meet again: breakfast with me at my rooms, to-morrow morning at nine; good-night!" and seemingly deeply impressed with the meeting with the young man, Burt Bernard turned away, stepped out of the grand entrance to the saloon, and walked rapidly up the dimly-lighted street.

But, from the other side, under the shadow of a tree, a man was watching him, and, ere Burt Bernard had gone a dozen paces, there came a shrill whistle, a dark form sprung out from the shelter of a door, and he was in a grasp he could not shake off, while he heard the words:

"Now, Burt Bernard, you die!"

At the same moment the man from the other side of the street, and who had given the whistle of warning, rushed up and also grasped the millionaire.

But another had heard the whistle, and his quick eye had seen the watching form, and bounding back, as he was ascending the stairs to the saloon, he rushed out upon the pavement and beheld the struggle.

Instantly he rushed to the rescue, there was a knife blow and a pistol shot together, and two men sunk upon the pavement in a heap, while a third dashed swiftly away from the scene, and a fourth stood above those who had fallen.

"By Heaven! it was that blonde-haired fellow I saw in the saloon, and I fear he has killed Mr. Bernard; it is too bad he escaped: but this fellow has my bullet through his brain, and," leaning over him and hesitating for an instant, "it is the Mexican companion of the other; who would have thought they were assassins."

"Here comes help, and then I shall know if Mr. Bernard is dead."

A crowd now gathered, and among them a police officer, and the young officer hastily made his report, and a carriage coming, he placed Mr. Bernard in it, and springing in himself was driven hastily to the rooms of the millionaire, when a surgeon who had been sent for arrived and examined the wounded man.

"The one who gave these knife blows, Lieutenant Arleigh, was not a common assassin, as he knew not where to strike," said the surgeon.

"See, these three glanced on the ribs, and are merely flesh wounds, and this one, entering his right side is the only dangerous one, and that I do not believe fatal, with quiet for the patient and careful nursing."

"He shall have careful nursing, sir," said Edwin Arleigh, and for the weeks that followed he kept his word, and when one day he was suddenly ordered to Utah with his regiment, he left Burt Bernard in no danger whatever.

Who was his assassin Burt Bernard could not find out, any more than could the police discover who was the dead Mexican, shot down by Edwin Arleigh, and a reward of ten thousand dollars, offered by the millionaire for the capture of his intended murderer, failed to do any good, for the blonde-haired and bearded stranger who had so often visited the gambling hell of an evening, and been seen on the streets in the afternoon, mysteriously disappeared from San Francisco, and the haunts that had known him knew him no more.

CHAPTER V.

BEEHIVE CITY.

BEEHIVE CITY, on the Overland road, was situated directly in the mountains, and was one of those characteristic settlements so common in the Western territories half-score or more years ago.

It was on a plateau, overhung by a lofty mountain, and far above the valleys upon either side, and was approached by a long, winding, and not very good road from the east, while the highway going west was a gradual slope for miles to the rough country beyond.

Originally a mere stage station, and then turned into a dinner stopping-place, it had not shown much prosperity until gold and silver

had been discovered in paying quantities in the mountains in the vicinity, and then, thither had flocked to Mountain Station, as it was at that time called, a large number of miners, and the consequent attendants and hangers-on of a mining camp.

In a short while the station improved so, the scene was such a busy one, and the inhabitants so felt their importance that a meeting was held, and Mountain Station changed its name to Beehive City.

As the business of the place, and its adjacent mining camps increased, the Overland stage company put on an extra coach, and from being only a dinner place, it also became a terminus for stages coming from both east and west.

With all the characters, from gamblers, miners and loafers, to stage-drivers, shop-keepers and pony riders, the most admired and looked up to, were those who held the ribbons from the box of an Overland coach, and of these Burke Halford was the idol.

Of course there were certain gamblers to be looked on with awe and admiration, a pony rider who was a pet of the masses, and others to command the respect of the wild bordermen; but none towered in glory to the height obtained by Burke Halford.

A giant in size, and a man who could easily handle three ordinary men, a dead shot, the champion driver, and a big-hearted, handsome fellow, he had won his way up, and was looked upon with almost universal envy and respect, and each trip in he was looked for eagerly, and always greeted with a cheer.

All poor loafers who hung round the bar-rooms for precarious drinks, were sure to hear, upon the arrival of Burke Halford, the generous invitation:

"Gents, put yer belts to ther bar an' say what yer will swallow, fer it are my treat, an' thet means ther invitation are general."

With plenty of excitement daily and nightly, from the striking of new leads to the killing of a miner and gambler, Beehive City suddenly found another cause for talk, and it became the general topic of conversation.

This new cause of excitement was the stopping of a coach on the mountain, where it passed through a dreary canyon, and the robbing of the passengers.

Burke Halford had been on the box, and with him the express messenger, while the vehicle contained half a dozen passengers.

Burke, in his quiet way had told the story upon the arrival of the stage at the station, and the circumstances were as follows:

"Hullo, Burke, where's Vint, the express messenger who was to come over with you?" called out Boss Boniface, the keeper of the station, and proprietor of the Beehive Palace, the hotel of Beehive City, and a board shanty that looked like a huge barn.

"He are inside with ther pilgrims, Boss, so shake 'em up, fer thar is some of 'em hain't dead, unless they died o' skeer," remarked Burke, throwing the lines upon either side to the stable-boys, and leisurely getting down from his box.

"Why Burke, what is the matter?" asked Boss Boniface, opening the stage door, and starting back as a dead form tumbled out upon the ground.

"He are dead, hain't he?" asked the driver.

"I should think so."

"Waal, thar are more of 'em so situated, Boss: thar is Vint, the messenger," and he drew out a slender form.

It was a young man with a beardless face, and he was dead.

"Come, pilgrims, this are Beehive City, an' yer is at ther Beehive Palace, so h'ist yerse's out, an' let's see ef thar is more trouble done," cried Burke, and out of the coach now came two frightened-looking men, whose dress and appearance showed them not to be denizens of the Far West.

Behind these came two miners, and they were supporting in their arms a comrade, dressed as they were, who seemed severely wounded, for he groaned as though in great anguish.

The wounded man, and the four unharmed passengers, were taken into the hotel by Boss Boniface, and the two dead bodies were borne away for burial, and then Burke Halford stepped into the adjacent bar-room, and gave his usual invitation, adding:

"Give me a leetle brandy, Spirit Dick, fer I needs bracin' arter what hev transpired."

Spirit Dick, so called on account of his occupation as dispenser of spirits, and not from his ethereal nature, for he tipped the scales at two hundred and forty pounds, gave the brandy-bottle and a glass to the driver, and then set up

the glasses and drinks for the others, and there was a goodly number of them, too.

"Gents, your good health and mine," said the stage-driver, with provoking coolness, for the crowd was at fever heat to know what had occurred on the run in of the coach.

The drinks were dashed off with a gusto, and then Grit Gaines, the Diamond Sport of Beehive City, said in his free and easy way:

"Spirit Dick, set up the drinks again to my tally, and in the mean time, Burke, give us the story of the stiff you brought in with you."

Now Grit Gaines was a man who was almost universally feared in Beehive City, in spite of the reckless souls he had for companions, and yet he was also exceedingly popular.

A young man with a beardless face, and looking scarcely over twenty-one years of age, there was yet that in his fearless eyes and resolute mouth, that would cause one to respect him for the courage he knew he possessed.

As handsome as a picture, and with a form perfect in outline, and womanly in his manner, he was yet a devil when aroused, possessed the strength of a giant, and on several occasions when bullied had shown the tiger in his nature, and proven that he feared nothing on earth.

Dressed like a dandy, yet he carried a couple of revolvers under his sack coat, as all knew, that he could use with deadly precision; but when any miner was in bad luck Grit Gaines aided him in a quiet way: did a gambler go broke and want money, he staked him; was any one sick, he nursed him, or paid some one to do so, and in this way he had gained the love of those who knew him, as, by his reckless gambling and daring nature, he had gained the prefix of Grit to his name of Gaines, shortly after his arrival in Beehive.

One day he had ridden up to the Beehive Palace, splendidly mounted and well armed, and had asked for the best room, and paid for it a month in advance.

On the books he had registered his name simply:

"ALLAN GAINES,
United States of America."

That evening he had appeared in the "Fortune's Lay-out," as the gambling and liquor saloon of the Beehive Palace was called, and had been picked up by some sports, who setting him down for a greenhorn, left him with but a V in their pockets, which he handed back to them with the remark:

"This will start you again, boys."

And, outside of his deeds in Beehive City nothing was known, and but one man had been found bold enough to inquire into his antecedents, and that man lost his life when pressing his insolent inquiries beyond forbearance.

But then Grit Gaines had him decently buried at his expense, and erected over him a tombstone to his memory.

Such was the man that had asked Burke Halford to tell the story of his adventure on the road, for all others were content, from the awe they felt for the great driver, to let him take his time.

CHAPTER VI.

THE STAGE-DRIVER'S STORY.

"PARDS, and gents," and Burke Halford, the stage-driver of the Overland, looked around upon the crowd, though which of the number he designated as "Pards," and which as "Gents," it would take a Philadelphia lawyer to find out.

"You wishes ter hear how it were I comed in today with some cold meat in my ole hearse, an' has no objection ter tellin' yer, an' will do so now, as I sees my festive friend Grit the Gambler, are gittin' a leetle impatient."

"A good deal impatient, Burke, for life's too short to wait an hour for a story that can be told in ten minutes; you found road-agents on the way in, doubtless?" said the handsome young gambler.

"That is jist what I did find: yer see, we hed come half up the mountain, and had entered Dead Man's Canyon, when all of a sudden I seen a horseman sittin' on his horse same as ef he were waitin' fer some one."

"An' thet are jist what he were doin', pards; he were waitin' fer us, an' we found it out too, fer Vint, ther messenger, says ter me, says he:

"Pard, thet man are masked."

"No," says I; but I says a lie, fer he were masked, fer he wore a red piece o' silk over his face, and hed eye-holes ter see out of."

"But he were a han'sum cuss, he were, as ter general looks an' make-up, speakin' 'ithout seein' his face, an' he rid a red-bay horse, an' he were armed clean through, an' were as fancy a

galoot as a Kansas gal w'u'd like ter tackle at a dance.

"Says I:

"Vint, thet are feller is a goin' ter tackle us, an' I guesses thar is more like him whar he come from."

"Says Vint:

"Pard Halford, I hasn't felt just right o' late, fer I hes hed ther idee I might hev my checks called in soon; but if it's fight, say ther word, an' I'll let 'em taste ther lead."

"Now, ther messenger hadn't been so cheerful o' late, an' I felt kind o' sorry fer him, fer when we gets ther warnin', boys, we hes ter go."

"Waal, I says:

"Vint, cheer up, ole feller, an' we'll see what is ter be did, when we knows ef his intentions is honorable."

"An' on I druv, pards, until I heerd ther music:

"Halt! up with yer hands!"

"I halted, I did, fer I doesn't like ter be cruel an' run over a man, an' as I cast my eye over my shoulder, I hed seen more of a kind; thet is, thar were horses plainly visible, an' whar thar were horses thar must hev been riders, tho' I e'u'd only see ther legs o' ther animiles under ther bushes."

"But Vint he yelled out, 'I'll see yer durned fust, yer robbin' galoot,' and away he pops at ther gent on horseback, an' Lord love ye, you'd oughter seen what happen."

"I heerd ther robber say suthin' 'mazin' like a prayer, or cussin', an' he come fer ther stage at a run, and shot ther messenger through ther head, an' then let inter ther stage, an' you'd hev been pleased ter hear then ther howlin' inside from them two tenderfeet from ther East."

"Waal, pards, I held my hands up same as I were a person askin' blessin's on his lambs, an' then ther red mask perceded ter git acquainted with ther contents o' ther hearse, fer nobody felt like shootin' sich a nice gent."

"Waal, I handed out ther express box, an' he just tuk ther bank-notes out, an' said, pleasant-like: 'Good afternoon, sir; we will meet again, and take a piece o' partin' advice.'

"What are it, yer durned red-faced gerloot?" says I.

"It are," says he, mighty polite-like, 'thet we will meet 'arly an' often, an' my advice are thet you ups yer han's when yer hears ther word, an' then yer won't git inter trouble with a bullet.'

"Says I:

"Thankee fer yer advice, pard; an' who is yer?"

"Says he:

"Call me Red Rider, or ther cap'n o' ther Red Riders o' ther Overland."

"He waved his hand, thet hed on it a red glove, guv a whistle, an' rode away, an' I heerd plenty o' ther gang follerin' him from whar they'd been hidin' in ther thickets on ther side o' ther canyon."

"Waal, pards, I picked up poor Vint, an' put him in ther hearse, whar ther were another stiff, an' one miner pilgrim wounded, and I druv on heur, you bet, an' ef ther Red Riders don't make trouble on ther Overland, jist call me a tootin' liar from Liarsville; what did yer say, pard Grit?"

"I said," responded the gambler pleasantly, "that it was a long time between drinks; set up the glasses again, Spirit Dick."

Such was the driver's story, and that it gave cause for excitement in Beehive City, the reader can well understand, for it was the first time road-agents had appeared on the Overland in the vicinity of that prosperous mining village.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RED RIDERS.

"HALT! Hands up!"

The stern voice that uttered the three words rung out as clear as a bugle, and the one to whom the threatening order was given dragged hard on the reins, his foot pressed down the brake, and the six horses drawing an Overland stage came to a sudden standstill.

The scene was an isolated spot in the Laramie mountains, and on the Overland Stage road, and the one who gave the stern command was a horseman, some ten paces ahead of the leaders, with revolver drawn and occupying a position in the center of a canyon.

"I pass, pard," was the laconic response of the stage driver, who dropped his reins, as he drew his horses down to a halt, and raised his hands above his head.

At once half a dozen heads peered out of the stage window, and several voices asked tremulously:

"What is it, driver?"

"A leetle obstacle in ther road," was the reply.

"Cannot we get out and remove it?" obligingly said one of the passengers.

"Guess yer'd better not try, pard, fer ther obstacle are a Red Rider."

"The Red Riders?"

The cry broke from the lips of every passenger, for all well knew who were the Red Riders of the Overland, and dreaded them as they did death itself.

"Yes, the Red Riders demand toll," came in the clear tones of the horseman, and looking out again the passengers saw but one enemy to bar their way.

"There is but one, and we are seven; we will resist," said a dark-faced, heavily-bearded man of fifty.

"There is others around, you bet; thet are ther captain," called out the driver, who overheard the remark.

All this had passed almost in an instant of time, and then the Red Rider's voice was again heard, asking:

"Driver, have you a passenger with you by the name of Burt Bernard?"

All in the coach hastily looked the one at the other, to see who would answer to that name, but not one showed evidence of being the person asked for, while the driver said:

"I hain't a school-teacher, capt'in, ter keep ther name o' ther pilgrims in my hearse; but I'll ask 'em."

"Hez ary one o' yer got ther handle o' Burt Bernard, pards, fur ther Red Rider would be pleased ter know, durn him."

No answer came, and the Red Rider immediately rode forward and glanced into the coach window, and all had a good look at him.

He was mounted upon a blood-red bay, and the saddle and bridle were of red leather, while he was dressed in a suit of black velvet, and wore a mask of scarlet that completely hid his face.

Around his slender waist was a scarlet silk sash, half hiding a belt that contained four revolvers, two on each hip, while two larger weapons were held in holsters upon either side of the saddle.

A black hat, with red cord encircling it, and a crimson ostrich plume, a pair of cavalry boots and red gauntlet-gloves covering his hands completed his costume.

His form was muscular, he sat his horse like one raised in the saddle, and though his face could not be seen, it was evident that it was full of reckless daring and resolution.

Glancing fearlessly into the window of the stage, he looked each passenger that sat on the back seat in the face, and then turned, at the same time moving his horse up a step, to observe those on the front seat.

"By the Rockies! one man sha'n't back me down; take that, you red devil!"

The speaker was a miner, suddenly driven to resistance by seeing no comrades to support the Red Rider, and he threw his revolver forward as he spoke and pulled the trigger.

But the cap snapped and before he could again cock the weapon, there came a flash and the miner fell back dead in his seat.

Without noticing the interruption, the Red Rider still held his smoking revolver ready; as if expecting others to resist; but had any one so intended, the fate of their companion cowed them and all remained silent.

"Your name is Burt Bernard; you are the one I want," said the Red Rider sternly, his eyes fixed upon the heavily-bearded passenger, who at once dropped his hand upon his pistol butt, to as quickly resume it at the words:

"Draw if you dare!"

"Well, sir, what want you with me?" sternly asked the bearded passenger.

"Had you made yourself known sooner you would have saved that poor fellow's life: but as it is, his death lies at your door, not mine."

"There is no need, sir road-agent, to discuss the matter, but tell me at once, what wish you with me?"

"Your company; dismount, please, from the coach, and it can go on to Beehive City, and if Burke Halford drives a faster gait he can arrive on time," said the Red Rider coolly.

"Do you mean that I am to remain your prisoner?" asked Burt Bernard.

"That is just what I do mean, sir; you either stay willingly alive, or I keep your dead body."

There was no doubting the words of the Red Rider, or his tone, and willing to compromise, the passenger said:

"What pledge do you give me if I remain that my life will be safe?"

"I give no pledges, sir; it will be for you to decide as to your living or dying. Hold! not one word will I allow you with your fellow-passengers, and if I see you make a motion to put your hand in your pocket I will kill you."

Burt Bernard glanced hopelessly around him, and thus he saw in the faces of his fellow-passengers that the dead form in their front had taken all the fight out of them.

For a moment he seemed determined to boldly resist, single-handed; but the revolver of the road-agent captain covered his heart, and he saw that it would be instant death to make a hostile motion.

On the other hand, by surrendering to his captor, there was a chance that his life would be saved, whatever the loss might be to him financially.

"You are detaining the coach, sir," cried the road-agent, sternly.

"Very well, I submit to your terms and surrender."

"A wise decision, Burt Bernard," and without taking his eyes off of his prisoner, he addressed the driver:

"Halford, you go back this evening, I believe?"

"Yes."

"Well, right at this spot you can pick up Mr. Bernard, if—"

"But he hain't going West, he are on ther way East, an' ef he's my way o' thinkin', he wishes he hed gone round by water."

"Yes, I forgot, he goes East: tell Bob Scott he will find Mr. Bernard here awaiting him, as he will be my guest until then."

"Will his toes be burned up, pard?" significantly asked Burke Halford.

"Not if he comes to my terms," was the laconic reply.

"An' ef he don't?"

"Then he'll have to be lifted into the hearse," significantly responded the Red Riders' captain, and he continued, addressing his prisoner:

"Now, Mr. Bernard, please dismount."

There was no hope, and Burt Bernard silently obeyed.

"Drive on, Halford, and, by the way, try and drill your passengers into not making fools of themselves by resistance, for I dislike to have to add so largely to your Beehive cemetery."

"Yer may git a monument thar yerself, Red Rider, some o' these days," growled Burke Halford.

The Red Rider laughed lightly, and the stage rolled on, leaving Burt Bernard standing in the road, moody and silent, and his captor covering him with his revolver.

CHAPTER VIII.

GAMBLER GRIT MAKES A PLEDGE.

WHEN the rattle of the stage died away, the masked Red Rider gave a peculiar call, and the sound of hoofs followed, coming out of the dense underbrush up the side of the canyon.

A moment after, a bay horse, saddled and bridled but riderless, trotted out into the trail, and approaching the two men, halted.

"Burt Bernard, here is the horse you are to ride; you see that I expected you to be my guest."

"Mount, please."

Silently the prisoner obeyed.

Wheeling alongside of him, the Red Rider gave another signal, and again a movement was heard in the bushes, and out of the thicket wheeled two horsemen, both mounted upon blood bays, wearing red masks and gloves, dressed in black, and sitting as upright as statues.

As they moved down the canyon, the chief and his captive followed, some sixty paces behind, and once more a signal echoed through the canyon.

The prisoner glanced back, as he saw his captor turn his head, and saw three more horsemen, the very counterpart of those in his front, ride down into the trail and follow in the rear.

Then, at a stern order from the chief, the horsemen set off at a rapid gallop.

Following the Overland trail for half a mile, and until they came in sight of the stage, the two leaders suddenly turned off to the right, and going single file went up a path leading into the mountains.

The clatter of their hoofs caused Burke Halford and the passengers to look back, and they feared that they were to be again attacked.

But seeing them turn off up the mountain they gave a sigh of relief, and the stage-driver sent his team along at a swinging gait, muttering:

"No more o' that in mine, ef yer please, Mr. Red Rider, fer it will be many a day afore I

forgot poor Vint's dead face, and ther look o' ther gent yer jist gobbled."

Arriving at Beehive City Burke Halford again had a thrilling story to tell of this second attack on his coach, and, as this was the fifth time a stage had been halted on the mountain during the past month, the excitement of the denizens of the mining town was greatly intensified.

"Boys, we must form a band of Vigilantes," said Grit the Gambler, when Burke had told his story, and he had invited Spirit Dick to set up drinks all round.

"What are ther Vigilantes ter do, gambler pard?" asked an old miner.

"Drive these Red Riders out of the mountains," answered Grit Gaines.

"Yer is quite youthful, pard, an' may be able ter shuffle a keerd prime, an' drap a inemy at sixty feet, but when thar is road-agents ter hunt, 'peers ter me, it takes wisdom ter hunt 'em, an' it hain't no hundred men heur hes ther idleness ter go s'archin' fer them fellers," wisely answered the miner.

"Why Placer Dave, you do not think it would take a hundred men to hunt down this Red Rider band of half a dozen?" returned Grit.

"Thet is jist what it will do, pard, fer I hev hed 'sperience thet way."

"I hes hunted ther agints in Colorady, out of Denver, and on other trails, an' when a band o' gritty men gets tergether to rob honest men o' their 'armin's, they expects ter die hard, they is 'quainted with ther country, hes retreats they kin take keer of, knows how ter handle weepins, an' a dozen soon gits ter be as good as a hundred in a fight."

"Sides, pards, thar is more'n a dozen o' these Red Riders, ef ther pilgrims an' drivers hain't liars."

"I hes never seen more'n six, Placer Dave; but I hev my suspicions thet they may be multiplied by ther figger 3, an' I'm with yer in b'lievin' it would take all o' Beehive City to oust 'em."

"No, we hes ter wait until they does some big damage to ther road, or ter a government express, or kills some big officer, an' then ther Overland Company will turn out ag'in 'em, an' ef it don't ther sogers will, an' I trust they'll do it soon, for it are a dangersome road to travel now."

"You are right, Burke, and I for one will step to the front to aid you."

"What is yer going ter do, Gambler Grit?" asked the driver.

"Well, I have considerable leisure on my hands, and I shall scout around and see what's to be done, and then organize a band to fight the Red Riders."

"I love excitement, and this will give it to me," and the gambler smiled, in his pleasant way.

"Durned ef it don't; yer'll git excitement ef yer tackle them Riders an' I 'vises yer ter jine ther church at onst, pard, fer yer'll need prayin' fer ter keep yer soul from goin' marchin' on," said Placer Dave, and all laughed.

But those who knew Gambler Grit well were satisfied that if he made up his mind to undertake anything, he would go through with it if it cost him his life, and, loving excitement, as did the denizens of that wild border town, they were glad to feel that Beehive City was not going to get dull for want of a topic of deep interest to discuss.

"Well, pards, I pledge myself to hunt down the Red Riders, or go under," said Gambler Grit, and his pledge was recieved with enthusiasm; but a second remark was even more enthusiastically received.

"Come, gentlemen, we'll drink to the pledge I make you."

All drank.

CHAPTER IX.

BISON BILL "HANDLES THE RIBBONS."

THERE was no doubt but that the Overland trail to Beehive City was daily becoming more dangerous to travel, for, of the four drivers of stages in and out of that sequestered hamlet, all had been halted on the road, and heard the threatening order:

"Hands up!"

As long as the drivers, or these "knights of the reins" as they were called, obeyed this very suggestive command, they were not harmed.

But if they neglected, a shot close to their ears, as a reminder, proved that they were merely spared as an accessory to bring through the mountains the "pilgrims" to be robbed by the Red Riders.

One driver, Gauntlet-Glove Jerry, had thought, with his usual recklessness, to run the gantlet of the Riders' fire, and had tumbled from his box a dead man, from a shot from the captain, another shot had brought down one of his wheel horses, and the passengers, after being rolled, were ordered to "drive the hearse on to the 'Hive, and tell the drivers not to follow in the foolhardy track of Gauntlet-Glove Jerry."

This summary way of dealing with such august individuals as were the stage drivers of the Overland, completely bewildered the Beehivers, and even set the drones to the task of thinking, while it sent Gambler Grit off on another solitary tramp to find the road-agents, for he had made several long scouts of late, yet without apparent success.

One day Brandt Hastings's coach came whirling up to the door of the Beehive Palace at a slapping pace, and as soon as it came in sight all that could do so, ran out to see what was the cause of the extraordinary haste.

The stage-horn had rung out louder, and far more merrily than ever Brandt Hastings had played it before, and the Beehivers expected to see the driver turn out a coach full of Red Riders his skill and courage had captured.

But as it drew nearer, some one cried out:

"They is runnin' away!"

"No, they isn't," called out another, and then hot and fast came the comments.

"Boys, Brandt Hastin's hain't got hold of them reins."

"No, thar is another galoot as has 'em."

"Thar are Hastings on ther top, an' he are laid out like a stiff."

"Yer is right, Buck, fer I recognizes his big feet with ther toes turned up."

"An' I sees his gloves; it are Brandt, an' he are did fer."

"But who in thunder are it holdin' ther ribbons?"

"Don't he handle 'em?"

"Who said they was runnin' away! Why he's plyin' ther silk to 'em."

"Who are he?"

"He are a screamer!"

"Look at thet, how he come through ther seven trees."

"Thar hes been work back thar, pards."

"It are a gal with them ribbins, fer see her long ha'r."

"It do look like a gal."

"Cl'ar ther way, o' he'll knock ther Pallis ter ther devil, an' upshot all ther trees."

"Not he; he's hed ther ribbins in his grip afore."

"Hooray!"

The last word was on a hundred lips, and it was meant as a cheer at seeing the splendid manner in which the driver brought the six foaming, running horses to a sudden halt directly in front of the hotel door.

A loud, firm "Whoa!" a strong pull, and the application of the California brakes, had shown that the driver, whoever he might be, had held the reins on a stage-box before, and it was no wonder that his masterly driving won a cheer from the crowd, who gathered around excitedly, for all could now see that something of a very startling nature had happened, and every eye was turned upon the young driver who had so skillfully brought the stage in.

"Well, sir; there is been trouble, I see," said Boss Boniface, inquiringly, addressing the young man who had sprung from the box, and who had approached him.

He was apparently under twenty years of age, to judge by his youthful, beardless face, though his form was tall and as firmly knit together as though he were a man of forty.

Dressed handsomely, in a blue flannel suit, the pants stuck in handsome cavalry boots, and wearing a gray sombrero, turned up upon one side, and held there with a gold pin representing a buffalo, he was a striking-looking personage in general make-up, while his face was strangely handsome, and combining in a remarkable degree the beauty of a woman with the dash, daring and resolution of a man who had faced danger with a cheek that would not blanch and an eye that would not quail.

Under his well-fitting sack-coat was visible a silver wire belt, and though they were concealed, it was evident that the revolvers rested upon either hip.

"Yes," he said, pleasantly, in answer to the remark of Boss Boniface.

"Yes; we had some trouble, but got through all right; but there is a lady in the coach that you might look after, and she has the pluck of the devil," and the young man started on into the hotel, when a man, a rough-looking miner, stepped forward and asked:

"Pard, I has sot eyes on you afore, an' ef I hain't a durned liar, you is ther healthy chap they calls Bison Bill?"

"Yes; and you are Nat Spencer, of Kansas," said Bison Bill, pleasantly.

"I are, clean through, pard, and I delights ter grip yer fist."

"And I to meet you, Nat; bring your friends and let us moisten our throats, before we catch on, sir, for I'm awfully dry."

"I'll do it; come, pards, this are a old pard o' mine, Bison Bill, Buffalo Billy, or whatany yer chooses ter call him."

"He hes kilt Injuns, turned up white toes, hes rid pony express, bullwhacked over the Mormon trail, druv stage, an' kin lick his weight in anything as keers ter takle him, an' now he says yer is ter come up an' pour benzine inter yer."

"Come, fer he hes ther dust, an' he means it."

This introduction and the invitation at once made Bison Bill "solid" with the boys.

CHAPTER X.

A MINER HAS SOMETHING TO SAY OF BISON BILL.

WHILE Nat Spencer, the miner from Kansas, had been intro-ucing Bison Bill in his peculiar way, Boss Boniface had helped from the stage a slender, graceful form, whose face was hidden beneath a gray veil.

"If her foot, form and hand are criterions, her face must be lovely," muttered Boniface, and then he asked himself mentally:

"Who is she, and what can she want in Beehive City?"

"Are you the landlord, sir?" she asked, as Boss Boniface escorted her into the hotel, leaving the three other passengers, a miner and two shop-keepers, to alight from the stage as they pleased.

"I am, miss—I mean madam," he answered, politely.

"I will remain some time with you, perhaps, and would be obliged for as pleasant a room as you can give me," she said, in a voice that was low and sweet in tone.

"You shall have the best the house has, miss—Mrs.—madam—"and it was evident Boss Boniface was fishing for the name to see if it was miss or madam.

"My name is Edith Ford," she answered, quietly, and Boniface was still at sea, for was it Miss or Mrs. Ford?

Upon that point she did not satisfy him, but raising her veil, she displayed a face of exquisite beauty.

It was a dark, Gipsy-like face, and there was that in it to win love or cause fear.

But it was perfect, and seemed youthful in the extreme.

At once charmed with his fair guest, Boss Boniface ran out to have her room put in readiness, and escorting her thither, she expressed herself delighted with her quarters.

"She is not poor, that is certain," he said, glancing at her diamonds, as he bowed his way out.

Going to the bar, Boss Boniface hoped to learn more of her from the young man who had driven in so skillfully; but he found that Bison Bill had gone off somewhere with Nat Spencer, and that most of the crowd had gone along with poor Brandt Hastings's body to his cabin, to prepare it for burial.

But in the saloon was an interested score of human beings, listening to a miner whom Boniface had seen get out of the stage.

"Waal, pards," he was saying, "all I know is this."

"Yer see we expected ter be chawed up by the Red Riders, and I were feeling durned narvous, fer I hed a leetle paper I hed jist sold my dust fer."

"But ther gal with ther gray veil, she seemed ter be as cool as a cucumber on ice, and ther two traders they was narvous too, though they hed nothin' much with 'em ter lose, they said."

"And Bison Bill?" asked one.

"Oh, he sat inside until Brandt Hastings sung out to him, thet they was approachin' Dead Man's Canyon, an' then he gits out on ther box, fer he had asked the driver ter let him know."

"He hed cotched sight o' ther gal's face when we stopped fer water, an' he seemed ter be kinder gone on her, an' all broke up with love, tho' he hadn't said nary word to her, other than ter pass ther time o' day, same as we all hed, an' then her voice seemed like a music-box wound up an' lettin' off poetry."

"Waal, when Bison Bill goes ter mount ther box, she said sweet like, same as ef she were tryin' ter keep honey in her mouth an' c'u'dn't, fer it would trickle out, says she:

"Does yer intend ter fight 'em, sir?"

"Says he:

"I does."

"You is a brave man," says she."

"Bully fer ther gal," cried a voice.

"So say we all of us," sung out another.

"Waal, pards," continued the miner, "yer see she were clean grit, an' I forgot she were a gal, an' I jist drop this ole dust-digger onter her knee, an' says I:

"Leetle gal, yer is a double-distilled brick."

"Oh! but she were solid, fer she says:

"Thankee, sir."

"Then she riz her voice an' says in the same purty way, addressin' ther Bison Bill Sport:

"Ef yer needs any help, sir, jist call on me."

"Boys, I come neur huggin' thet gal right thar then, an' tharover, but I perceived, as thar was thet in her face as said:

"Don't do it, pard, fer if I is ter be hugged, I likes ter pick ther hugger, an' it didn't seem like I was jist ther feller she'd pick."

"Waal, ther hosses seemed ter step along more peeter, when Bison Bill got on top ther box, an' we heerd him and Brandt Hastings chinnin' pleasant, an' then he laughed like a school-boy jist let out 'o school, an' we was in ther canyon."

"Then come ther 'spected word ter halt, an' glancin' out o' ther hearse I seen ther Red Riders comin' down inter ther road afore an' ahind ther coach, an' ther cap'n comin' on ther gallop straight fer us."

"When I looked back I seen a sight as tickled me same as ef I hed swallowed a feather, an' what do you think it were?"

"Waal, it were ther gal aforesaid, an' in each hand she hed a silver-mounted shootin'-iron, an' ef she didn't mean biz, then I are mistooken."

"But next I heerd ther Bison feller sing out to ther Red Rider cap'n ter go towards China through the 'arth, an' next come a pistol crack, another, an' then another, an' then loud trampin' o' feet, a yell as come from poor Brandt Hastings, an' we went on ag'in like ther devil."

"I made bold ter look out, an' folks, I tells yer, ther Red Riders was dustin', one horse were down, an' ef I mistook not, it were ther cap'n's, an' he were half under him."

"Then I glanced up at ther box, an' I seen Bison Bill sling Brandt Hastings back on ther roof o' ther hearse and seize ther reins, an' Lordy! how he did put ther silk to ther animiles, an' we went through ther canyon like huntin' buff'ler."

"Waal, ther gal says ter me, fer them tender-feet were skeert thet bad they was white an' tremblin, says she:

"Mister miner, what hev occurred?"

"Said I:

"Miss, thar hev been a yarthquake, an' Bison Bill are ther rooster thet set it a-goin'."

"She smiled sweet an' put up her weepins, an' thet youngster they calls ther Bison jist pulled us in heur, and hear we is, awful dry, ef I does say so."

Boss Boniface, who had listened in silence to the story, took the hint, and ordered Spirit Dick to "set 'em up all round!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE VAILED WOMAN.

WHETHER it was this last outrage and the killing of Brandt Hastings that had caused Gambler Grit to decide to make another effort to capture or kill some of the Red Riders, I cannot say, but certain it is that as soon as he heard that Bison Bill had boldly run the gantlet of the road-agents, he mounted his horse and, with a couple of days' provisions, went off in another hunt after these terrors of the Overland trail.

"Thet feller will turn up missin' yit, full o' grit as he is," said one who saw him ride off.

"I guess he are strivin' fer ther reward the Overland Company an' ther Governor are offerin' fer ther heads o' ther Red Riders," remarked another.

"Guess Grit ther Gambler don't keer much fer ther dust, fer he allus has plenty, as I have seen; but he are just dare-devil enough to wish ter fetch in a Red Rider by himself, an' ef he keeps it up, I'm thinkin' he'll do it, fer he's a capt'in, he are," put in a third.

"Of whom are you speaking, gentlemen?"

The question fell upon them like a bombshell. Though a very natural query for a stranger to make, it took the half-dozen idlers by surprise.

And for two reasons.

First, the voice was low, sweet, and winning.

Second, the questioner called them gentlemen, a title they seldom had applied to them.

All turned to the right-about, and saw stand-

ing within five feet of them, leaning over the railing of the hotel piazza, so designated from courtesy, a young girl.

She was beautiful, that was certain.

Her form was exquisite, and she was dressed in a blue flannel suit, trimmed with gold braid and brass buttons.

Her hair, as black as ink, was wound above her head in a large coil, and fastened by an ivory comb.

In her ears were two solitaire diamonds, and a match to them glittered on her left forefinger, while a ring, suspiciously like a wedding-ring, for it was a band of gold, was on the third finger of her left hand.

She was looking squarely in the faces of the crowd of men, and each one afterward swore that she looked only at him.

It was the young lady who had come in the stage-coach with Bison Bill, and offered her services if needed.

This circumstance won the hearts of the men at once, and every ragged hat was doffed with the regularity of an "order arms!"

"Of whom were you speaking, gentlemen?" she again asked, with a smile, as none had answered her.

"O' a galoot as did jist ride out toward the mountain, miss," one said, hesitatingly.

"A gambler, I believe you called him?"

"Yas, miss, he's a shuffler o' keerds, an' what he can't do with ther pasteboards no one else need try."

"What did you say was his name?" persisted the lady.

"Waal, miss, he writ hisse'f down as Allan Gaines, an' hailed from ther universe in ginerall; but he hes sich uncommon sand, are so game clean through, thet we calls him Grit, an' as he hes a style o' playin' keerds, we puts it to him as Grit ther Gambler."

"Allan Gaines!"

The name broke from the lips in a way that proved the woman had spoken them in a meditative way, as though she were going back over the tablets of memory, to discover where she had heard it before.

"Allan Gaines, or Grit the Gambler," again she said.

"Yes, miss, thet are it."

"He is the gentleman I wished to see; where is he now?" she asked, in the same moody manner.

"Gone on a scout arter ther Red Riders."

"Ah! not alone?"

"Yes, miss."

"He went alone, you say?" and she seemed to feel some sudden and deep interest in the young gambler.

"He did fer a fact, an' he are about ther only rooster in this heur lay-out as w'u'd do it too, I'm guessin'."

"Has no one yet discovered who these Red Riders are?" she again asked.

"No one seems ter wish ter be familiar with 'em, miss."

"They beard you all here with impunity."

"Don't know but what they does, miss, tho' I doesn't know yer meanin' adzactly."

"Why do not some of you men band together and hunt them down?"

"Diggin' dust pays better, miss; we is lookin' fer gold, not lead an' steel."

"There are two rewards offered for the capture of these Red Riders?"

"Yes, miss; one of five thousand, fer ther chief, the Overland Company will give, an' ther Territory Governor will give as much more fer ther captur o' ther lay-out."

"And I will give five thousand dollars for the capture of the Red Rider chief, and one thousand more for each of his men."

All started and gazed with renewed interest upon the beautiful woman.

Who and what was she, that she offered such generous rewards for the Red Rider captain and his band?

That was a question they could not solve.

Then one, who had been the chief spokesman, said:

"Will yer put thet down, miss, in ink?"

"Yes," and she turned away and entered the hotel, saying simply:

"Wait!"

She was absent for some minutes, and returning had in her hand a dozen slips of paper.

"Post these about conspicuously, please," she said, and handed all but one to the crowd.

That one she herself posted upon the front of the hotel, and again entered the house.

As she did so, Bison Bill came along, and at the request of the surprised crowd read what she had written.

It was in a bold hand, and read as follows.

"\$5,000 REWARD."

"I will pay to the one who captures alive the chief of the road-agent band, known as
THE RED RIDERS,

the sum of

FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS,

and to whom shall also capture, or kill any member of his band, the sum of

ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS,

for each and every one taken or slain.

"EDITH FORD,
"Beehive Palace,
"Beehive City."

"Guess you'd as soon hev ther gal as the dust, Bison Bill," said Nat, with a sly twinkle in his eye.

"I shall at least try for the reward, Nat," and Bison Bill walked away thoughtfully.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RED RIDER'S DEMAND.

WHEN the band of Red Riders at last came to a halt with Burt Bernard their prisoner, they were some ten miles from Dead Man's Canyon, and in the very heart of the mountains.

To the north of Beehive City lay the mining camps, and a score of miles away, and even the boldest prospector for gold had left the wild fastnesses where the Red Riders had their home, unexplored.

It was a spot reached only by risk of limb and life, of both steed and rider, and a dozen approaches to it could be held by a couple of determined men, well armed, against almost half a hundred.

Once in the retreat Burt Bernard's first thought was how much nature had done to protect the outlaws from pursuit and attack, and to support them after they were in their stronghold, for the grass grew in luxuriance, the streams were clear and crystal and icy cold, and the game wandered about in abundance, seeming little to dread the presence of man.

Beneath the branches of a huge tree a tent was pitched, and before it burned a fire of logs, at which stood an Indian, preparing the mid-day meal.

No other tent or habitation was visible in looking up the glen, and toward this the Red Rider chief rode, his prisoner by his side.

The other Red Riders bore silently away up the glen, and disappeared in a thicket, before which were several other horses feeding upon the juicy grass.

"Here is my home, Burt Bernard; dismount, and Stinging Snake will soon have us some dinner, after which we will discuss the cause of my bringing you here," said the Red Rider chief, quietly.

Then turning to the red-skin, who was a stately Ute chief, he said something in the Indian tongue to him, and walked away in the direction his horsemen had gone.

The Indian grunted a reply, but though he did not look at Burt Bernard, it was evident that he was his keeper in the absence of his chief.

Throwing himself upon a bear-skin robe, Burt Bernard gave himself up to thought, and mused aloud.

"What," he muttered, "is to become of me?"

"After all I have passed through, with gold and hope of honor and luxury in my grasp, am I to die now?"

"No, this devil cannot mean to kill me.

"He will bleed me of my gold, and bleed me well, for somehow he knows I am rich.

"That is all, I think.

"But who is he?"

"That's the question; and how familiar his voice sounds.

"I have heard it before, and seen him, too.

"By Heaven! I verily believe he is the blonde-bearded man who made an attempt on my life that night in Frisco, to rob me of my winnings.

"No, not my winnings, but what that noble fellow, Edwin Arleigh, won back for me.

"I am sorry he was ordered off so suddenly, as I was drawn toward him strangely, considering the phantoms his face brought up.

"Ah! here comes that accursed Red Rider."

Back again to the tent now came the Red Rider captain, and the Indian having prepared the meal, he invited his prisoner to partake of it with him.

But Burt Bernard was in no mood for eating, and paced to and fro, while the Red Rider, raising the curtain of his mask just above his mouth, sat down and ate heartily.

"I wish I could see the rest of his face, or recall who that man is," said Burt Bernard in a puzzled way.

After finishing his dinner, at which he was waited on in silence by the Stinging Snake, the Red Rider entered his tent, calling to his prisoner to follow him.

"Be seated, sir," he said, motioning to a buffalo robe, while he sat down upon a bear-skin.

Silently Burt Bernard obeyed.

After an instant of thought the Red Rider said:

"Burt Bernard, I have long waited and hoped for this moment, when I could be face to face with you."

"Why, may I ask?"

"Because I cherish against you feelings of the intensest revenge."

Burt Bernard turned a shade paler, but asked, calmly:

"How have I wronged you?"

"Bitterly; but never mind what you have done, as it all depends now upon what you will do, to save your life and your money."

"What is it you demand of me?"

"I believe you have a daughter?"

Burt Bernard started, and said, in a low tone:

"What of her?"

"Her name is Helen?"

"Yes."

"Named after an old love, whose maiden name was Helen Tracey?"

"Who are you, man?"

"It matters not; is she as beautiful as was Helen Tracey?"

"You knew Helen, then?" quickly cried the prisoner.

"Yes."

"Again I ask, who are you?"

Without noticing the remark, the Red Rider went on:

"Your daughter is at a fashionable boarding-school, I believe?"

"She has just graduated."

"She is your heiress?"

"Yes."

"You love her very dearly?"

"Above all else in the world."

"More than your riches?"

"Yes."

"More than your life?"

"Yes."

"You wish to see her happy?"

"Above all things."

"She must marry, then."

"Marry? why she's but a child."

"She is eighteen; the same age Helen Tracey was when she cast you off for your rival, Hugh Arleigh; by the way, what ever became of poor Arleigh?"

Burt Bernard turned livid, but he had schooled himself well to self-control, and answered in an indifferent way:

"He failed, and then disappeared, I believe."

"Poor fellow! now tell me if your daughter has ever loved any one?"

"No."

"Well, she must marry."

"You are bold, sir, and—"

"Now be careful, for out here a life is of hardly any consequence, and you might lose yours."

"Hear my demand."

"Well?"

"You must make your will, leaving all you have to your daughter, upon one condition."

"Name it."

"That she marries one I will select for her."

"You are an accursed fool, and I will—"

"No you won't, and I am not an accursed fool."

"The one I wish your daughter to marry is a noble fellow, a gentleman, and he already loves her, I know, though he does not know who she is."

"Bah! you talk like an idiot; your crimes have turned your head," said Burt Bernard, sneeringly.

"No; I talk sense, and I will prove it: your daughter was at the opera one night in the city where she attended boarding-school, and it caught on fire?"

"Yes."

"She occupied a box with several schoolmates and a couple of her teachers?"

"Yes."

"In the wild fright and confusion all would have been lost but for the act of a young man, who saved them by leading them out by a small window that opened upon the roof of an adjoining house?"

"Yes."

"Your daughter fainted, and was borne out in the arms of her preserver?"

"Yes."

"Well, that young man was—"

"Ha! you know him then?"

"I do."

"Well, I am glad to be able to find out who he was; please tell me his name," eagerly said Burt Bernard.

"First let me say that he sat in the orchestra with his father, admiring the beauty of your daughter, and then said that she was one he could love."

"The moment the fire broke out, he made his way to the box, and saved her and her party."

"He did not know who she was, for he left early the next day; but his father met her afterward on the street, asked who she was, and found out that she was your daughter."

"Now he is the young man I intend your daughter shall marry," and there was that in the face of the Red Rider that proved he would hesitate at nothing to gain his end.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PLEDGE.

FOR an instant Burt Bernard made no reply to the determined demand of the Red Rider; but then he said, in a low, firm voice:

"I love my child more than all else in the world, and I will never force her to do that which will render her unhappy."

The Red Rider answered:

"It will not make her unhappy; she owes her life to the young man, and that is a strong bond, while he already loves her, I tell you."

"And is your friend?"

"Yes."

"Then she will marry a villain."

"Ha! do you mean to insult me?" was the angry cry.

"How can I?"

"You are a road-agent, the chief of a band of devils that are the terror of this country, and your life is stained with crimes."

"Being such yourself, what else can be the man you call your friend?"

"Good reasoning, I'll admit," sneered the Rider.

"But, Burt Bernard, he is not a villain, although I say he is my friend."

"He holds an honorable position in life, and little dreams what I am."

"Ah! I have your word for it only."

"True, and my word is good; beware, Burt Bernard, for I know that you are not one to throw censure upon a miner."

Burt Bernard shuddered, and, as though to hide his emotion, said quickly:

"Well, I refuse your demand."

"No, you do not, for I hold the whip-hand of you."

"You are a rich man; a large sum you dug out of a mine, and by speculation you increased your wealth."

"You now have with you gold checks amounting to nearly all you are worth, and I know it."

Burt Bernard now became livid, and as he passed his hand over his brow he trembled violently, while the Red Rider continued:

"This money you can go on with to your home, if you agree to my demand."

"If not, you shall indorse these gold drafts, and I will kill you, Burt Bernard, and then, go on myself and marry your daughter to the one I have selected to be her husband. Remember, she will lose the fortune you would leave her, marry the man I wish her to, and you will forfeit your life."

"Now, sir, what will you do?"

It was evident that Burt Bernard realized most fully the position he was in, and that there was no escape from it.

He had already, through an agent, purchased a handsome home in a pretty Eastern town, and had built castles in the air of the happiness he would enjoy there in the company of his beautiful daughter.

But now the cup of hope was snatched from his lips, and death and despair stared him in the face.

In utter dejection, he asked:

"Who is this young man you would force my daughter to marry?"

"Do you agree to give your written consent to my demand, and thus be allowed to go on your way unmolested?"

"I can do nothing else, God knows," he said, in a tone of anguish.

"Write then as I dictate; here are pen, ink and paper."

A portfolio was placed in the hands of the prisoner, and he wrote, in a hesitating way, as the Red Rider directed:

"CAMP IN THE MOUNTAINS, September 1, 18—

"I, Burton Bernard, do—"

"Hold on, sir!" suddenly cried the Red Rider, in an angry tone.

"Well, sir?"

"You are disguising your hand; no tricks with me, Burt Bernard, for I know your writing and signature as well as I do my own."

With a sigh at having been detected, Burt Bernard tore up the paper and commenced again, and in his natural handwriting:

"CAMP IN THE MOUNTAINS, September 1, 18—

"I, Burton Bernard, do hereby pledge myself to give to my daughter Helen my property only on condition that she becomes the wife of—"

"Leave blank space for the name," interrupted the Red Rider.

"Well, it is done."

"Should she refuse," continued the Red Rider, and Burt Bernard wrote as the other dictated, "then not one dollar of my estate shall go to her at my death, but all be willed to a charitable home for old men and women."

"And I also pledge myself the marriage of my daughter and the said — shall take place within the term of one year from date."

"BURT BERNARD."

"Now, sir, why did you leave the name out?" asked Burt Bernard.

"Simply to keep you in suspense as long as possible; you can write it in now."

"Well?"

"It is the name of the son of your old rival."

"What! the son of—"

"Of Hugh Arleigh."

"Good God!"

In amazement Burt Bernard sprung to his feet and paced to and fro.

At last the Red Rider spoke in his quiet way:

"Do you object to the young man?"

"He had two sons, twin brothers, I believe?"

"Yes."

"Which one of them is it?"

"One went to the bad, and is a gamblersomewhere now in Kansas; the other entered the army, and is a gallant officer now on the border."

"Yes; which one is it?" and breathlessly Burt Bernard awaited the reply.

"It is Edwin."

"He is the officer?"

"Yes."

"Thank God!"

"You know him then?"

"Yes, and I owe him my life. God be thanked, my child will not be made wretched by her father's accursed folly."

"But what is this noble man, this Edwin Arleigh to you, an outlaw?"

"He is one that I owe much to, and I therefore wish to return him some favor."

"Now, we can return to the canyon, and you can continue on with Bob Scott, who drives the East-bound stage this evening; but fill in the blanks with the name of Edwin Arleigh, while Snake gets our horses."

Silently Burt Bernard obeyed, and taking the paper the Red Rider folded it up carefully, while the Indian led the horses forward.

Mounting, the two men rode slowly away, while a shrill whistle brought out of the distant timber a dozen mounted horsemen, who followed slowly on after their leader.

CHAPTER XIV.

A NEW GRIPE ON THE RIBBONS.

THE very generous reward offered by Edith Ford, the strange and beautiful young lady at the Beehive Palace, put the denizens of Beehive City to thinking, and the result was that when Burke Halford came in with the story of the loss of one passenger by capture and another by death, and two of the drivers, Brandt Hastings and Gauntlet-Glove Jerry had been called to hand in their checks, while Bison Bill had boldly driven through, they decided that something must be done at once.

Bob Scott, on the East-bound coach, had reported that he had met Burt Bernard in Dead Man's Canyon, awaiting him, and had picked him up and carried him on with him to the end of his drive.

But the Red Riders had been nowhere visible and Burt Bernard had had little to say of his visit to the agents, but had said they numbered over a dozen, for he had seen that number.

On his way back Bob Scott had been halted, and several of the passengers had been robbed by the daring captain of the Red Riders, whose men, as usual, sat like statues on their horses looking on.

As Gambler Grit had not returned, the young lady at the Beehive Palace, seemed to grow nervous, and, as Burke Halford was going to mount his box to go out on the Eastern drive, she suddenly called out:

"I will go with you, Mr. Halford."

"Better not, miss; these is dangersome times fer men folks, not to speak o' wimmin."

"I do not feel any fear, and if you will kindly wait a moment I will accompany you," was the fearless response, and in a couple of minutes she ran out with hat and cloak on, and asked Boss Boniface to aid her to the box by the side of Burke Halford.

The driver seemed exceedingly delighted at this preference shown him, and in spite of the dangerous road he was to travel, there were a number in the crowd that envied him.

With a crack of his whip, Burke sent the team flying down the road, and the coach disappeared from sight, while those who frequented the dominions of Spirit Dick gossiped over the probabilities of new adventures to be met with on the run to the next station, and wondered why the maiden had risked her life by going.

"If ther Riders show 'emselves, pards, ther gal will be heerd from," remarked a miner, and in this opinion all seemed to agree.

In the mean time the coach rolled swiftly on, and the pleased look on the face of Burke Halford did not change until Dead Man's Canyon came in sight.

Then he became serious, ceased chatting with his fair companion, took his reins well in hand, and drove on in silence.

The echoes of the hoof-falls and the roll of the wheels alone broke the silence, and the stage entered the dismal canyon, with all inside silent and dreading, and the two on the box calm and fearless.

But through the shadowy canyon it passed, and Burke Halford gave a deep sigh of relief.

"You certainly expected trouble that time," said Edith Ford, turning to him.

"I sartinly did, miss; but it's got ter come yit," was the serious answer.

"Do you mean that they will waylay us at some other place?"

"Oh, no; that is thar place fer diviltry; but I means thet in ther Dead Man's Canyon I'll yit pass in my checks," he said sadly.

"Nonsense! they will not kill you, if you halt when told to."

"Gauntlet-Glove Jerry an' Brandt Hastings hes both gone under, miss, an' you knows thet Bob Scott an' me is both doin' double duty as t'other drivers hain't anxious ter foller this heur road."

"Well, if you believe you will lose your life here, why do you not give up the position and take something else?"

"Oh, miss, it 'tain't no use ter try an' dodge death; he'll find yer out wharever yer may go, an' thar is suthin' heur tells me thet he are hot on my trail."

"You have a presentiment of evil?"

"Yas, miss, same as poor Vint ther messenger did, an' it come true on him, an' will do ther same on me."

"Don't feel that way, Mr. Halford, for you must shake of this gloom upon you," said the maiden in a cheering, kindly tone.

"I can't give it ther shake, miss; I only wishes I c'u'd; but we won't talk o' it now, but upon some cheerful topic as will make us laugh an' I does love ter see yer smile an' show them pretty teeth o' yours; is they doctor made, miss, or did yer raise 'em yerself?"

"I raised them; they just growed, as Topsy said, Mr. Halford," laughed Edith Ford.

"Waal, they is as white as milk, an' as shiny as a nigger's heel; an' yer eyes dances lively when yer laughs, an' does my heart good ter see it; he'll be a daisy gerloot, miss, as gits you ter tie to him fer life, an' ef he don't use you right, jist tell me, an' I'll kill him, ef I doesn't die in Dead Man's Canyon."

At the words of the driver Edith Ford suddenly turned deadly pale, and set her teeth hard: but she turned her face away to hide the sudden emotion sweeping over her, and asked quietly, after a moment of silence:

"You will let me return on the box with you, Mr. Halford, and not allow any man to take it?"

"Nary man hain't lookin' fer a seat up heur now, miss, an' you'll be welcome to it."

"Thar hes but one man rid on ther box o' any of our hearses o' late, an' thet were thet handsome young chap they calls Bison Bill; did yer see him, miss?"

"Yes, and he is a very dashing, handsome young man."

"Yer is right, miss, an' ef he hain't a good one, I hes fer delight in it."

"He drives better than I does ter-day, an' thet are sayin' much, fer I hain't no slouch an' thar will be somebody in Beehive as will tackle

him some day an' find they hes bit off more than they kin chew, as they did with Grit ther Gambler."

"And who is this Grit the Gambler, Mr. Halford?" asked Edith Ford with sudden interest.

"He are a good one, from Goodonesville, miss; a keerd-shuffler, but clean grit, and squar in dealin' with them as needs sympathy, but a terror ter others."

"It 'pears ter me, miss, thet sich prime fellers as be Bison Bill and Gambler Grit c'u'd jist walk away with thet leetle heart o' yours."

"You would not have them both walk off with it, Mr. Halford?" she said with a laugh; but the laugh was forced.

"Oh no, only one kin win in a game o' thet kind, miss; now, ef yer'd like ter larn ter drive jist tackle ther ribbins," and Burke handed the reins to the maiden.

But after an instant he cried with amazed delight:

"Waal, ef yer is'n't a driver from Driversville call me a Injun; yer is ther boss driver I ever see," and he gazed with admiration as the maiden sent the team at a rapid pace over a really dangerous road, and with a skill that was marvelous.

In fact, he never again took the reins until the stage rolled into the station at the end of his drive.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

"THEt feelin' o' gloom grows on me, miss."

It was the first remark made by Burt Halford for over a mile, as the stage rolled along, on its return trip to Beehive City, and he sat on his box, with Edith Ford by his side as his fair companion.

"For shame, Mr. Halford; you said you would not get blue," she answered.

"Can't help it, miss; I are not afeered to die, tho' I isn't pining fer it ter come arter me."

"I enjoys life as it are, an' w'u'd be content ter count some more years afore I hes ter pass in my chips."

"But then, ther shadow o' death are on me, I knows, an' ther nearer I gits ter ther Dead Man's Canyon, ther deeper ther shadow grows."

"Will you do me a favor, Mr. Halford?" suddenly asked the maiden.

"I are ther boy thet will, miss."

"Then, feeling as you do, get into the coach and let me drive through the canyon, for you know that I can."

"I knows thet yer kin drive to ther taste o' any one, miss; but Burke Halford hain't ther man ter leave ther post o' duty, when he thinks death are comin' ter occupy it."

"Only for this once, and then, my word for it, this presentiment of death will pass away," pleaded the maiden.

"No, miss; thar be in ther inside o' this hearse four pilgrims, an' I c'u'dn't look 'em in ther face ef I was ter duck my head inside."

"No, miss; I sits right on this box."

"Well, let me drive through the canyon, then."

"Yas; I'll do thet fer yer; but when ther word comes ter halt an' hands up, yer must stop, fer I w'u'dn't hev yer hurted fer ther world."

The maiden made no reply, but grasped the reins, changed her seat to the right of the box, and sent the team ahead at a more lively pace.

And into the canyon the coach rolled at a rapid gait, and the shadows of the overhanging trees were upon them.

"There they is, miss."

It was Burke Halford that spoke, and his voice she hardly recognized.

Glancing ahead, she saw four horsemen blocking the road ahead, and a quick look behind showed as many more just entering the canyon and following.

Setting her teeth she took a firmer grasp of the reins, and chirped to the horses to quicken their pace.

"Halt! hands up, or die!"

There was no mistaking the ringing voice, or the determination to carry out the threat if the order was disobeyed.

But the notice taken of it by Edith Ford was to bring the whip suddenly down upon the horses, and to cry to them to go, in a tone that made them bound forward at full speed.

"Great God, Miss! you'll be kilt," shouted Burke Halford, and he leaned forward to seize the reins, when there came a sharp report, and with a cry he fell from the box, directly down upon the backs of the wheel-horses, that, startled by the blow, sprung madly forward, forcing those in advance into a terrific pace.

But, though seeing the brave driver shot from his box, and hearing the crushing sound as the wheels went over his body, Edith Ford did not lose her presence of mind for an instant, but, rising, held the reins in one hand, while with the other she drew a revolver and fired upon the captain of the Red Riders, who was just riding down into the canyon.

Surprised at the act, he reined his horse suddenly back, but not to fire, although his revolver, that had just killed poor Halford, was thrust forward, and without a word allowed the stage to dash away through the canyon, a shrill whistle as a signal to his men ahead, causing them to hurriedly seek safety in the timber.

CHAPTER XVI.

BISON BILL GOES TO DEAD MAN'S CANYON.

HAVING once determined to run the gantlet of the Red Riders, Edith Ford urged the horses on with loud cries, and sent several shots after the retreating horsemen as they disappeared in the timber.

Seeing that the stage was dashing along at a terrific speed, and one of the passengers having seen the driver fall from the box, and all felt the shock as the wheels dashed over him, they believed that they would be dashed to pieces, if they were not shot by the Red Riders, and were in no enviable position.

Hearing the shots fired by the maiden, one of their number glanced out of the stage window and looked up and down the canyon.

"Pards," he cried, excitedly, "ther Riders hes got, an' we is gittin', fer ther horses is runnin' away, an' yit ther gal are a-holdin' onto ther ribbons fer all she is worth."

"Shall I help yer, miss?" he called out to Edith.

"No; I can manage them," was the short reply, and the determination half formed to climb out on the box was checked, for the passenger liked not the flashing eyes turned upon him.

But that she spoke the truth he soon discerned, for the horses were kept in the road, every deep rut and large rock was skillfully avoided, and though the team went flying along the mountain road at a break-neck pace, it was evident that they were held well in hand by the fair driver.

Up and down the trail, around the mountain-side, and then straight for Beehive City they went, their necks stretched, their nostrils panting and their hides white with sweaty foam.

But when they slackened their speed there was heard by the passengers the shrill chirp and cry of the beautiful driver, and then followed the crack of the whip as the "silk" was laid on, and all knew that it was to be a run clear into the station of Beehive City.

At last the loafers and gossips heard the ringing hoofs coming, and a crowd quickly gathered in front of the hotel to discover why Burke Halford was coming in at such break-neck speed.

"It hain't Bison Bill a-drivin' this time, fer he are heur," said one.

"Whoever it are, he do be makin' ther critters fly," responded another.

"Here she comes!"

The cry burst from a dozen throats in chorus, and into full sight swept the six horses.

Then another cry broke from the crowd, and Boss Boniface fairly shouted:

"The girl is driving!"

"Yas, Burke are not on the box," said Nat Spencer, and in breathless silence all waited as the stage came on at a thundering pace.

"Stop 'em, or they bu'st ther hearse an' kill ther gals an' ther pilgrims."

"An' ther pilgrims is anxious accordin'," cried a voice, as all saw two heads looking anxiously out of each window of the coach.

"Hold on! the girl has the team in hand," cried Boss Boniface, as the crowd surged about, as if to try and check the flying team.

He saw what the others then discerned, that though at full speed, the team was held in hand.

And the next minute up came the six horses at a run, the fair driver gave a strong tug on the reins, her small, neatly-booted foot went down hard on the brakes, and she said, firmly and sharply:

"Whoa!"

With a suddenness that bumped the heads of the passengers together, though this was not complained of as it was at last a halt, the coach stopped, and willing hands grasped the bits of the horses, while Edith Ford nimbly sprung from her lofty perch to the ground, and was half caught by Boss Boniface, who cried eagerly:

"Well done, Miss Ford: but where is Burke?" "Lying back in Dead Man's Canyon," was the reply in a trembling voice.

"Dead!"

"Yes."

"And by—"

"The captain of the Red Riders killed him."

"Didn't he halt when ordered?"

"He was not driving."

"He was not driving!"

"No, I held the reins, and thought we could run through; and we did, but poor Mr. Halford was shot, and falling before the wheels was run over; I then drove on and the Red Riders let us pass."

"They did fer a fact. Ther gal skeert them, as bad as she skeert us a-racin' over ther moun'tins; but I is obleeged to yer, miss, all ther same, as I had a leetle dust with me ther Riders didn't git."

"Yer hes a noble backbone, miss, an' ther devil hesn't got more grip than you hes," and one of the passengers came forward and offered his hand, which Edith frankly grasped.

It was the same one who had offered his services to the maiden, after Burke Halford's death, and he continued:

"As yer saved my dust, miss, I are willin' ter drink yer good health, so boys, we'll adjine to ther benzine mill an' liquor up, an' you, miss, shell hev a bottle o' wine ef it costs a twenty-dollar piece, an' we'll drink to ther pluckiest petticoat as ever I see."

The crowd willingly followed the miner, while Boss Boniface led Edith Ford into the hotel, and received from her a more detailed account of the affair.

"We must bury poor Burke, so I'll get some of the boys and we'll go after his body," said the kind-hearted proprietor of the Beehive Palace.

"And I will accompany you, for I wish to try the horse I purchased of you," said Edith.

"It's a dangerous trip, for we may meet the Red Riders."

"You forget that I have just met them."

"Ah, yes, I will have the horse saddled for you," and Boss Boniface went to call together a company of volunteers to go after the body of the slain driver, when he was met by Bison Bill, who said quietly:

"Mr. Boniface, I have just learned of the last attack on the coach, and am going to bring the body of poor Halford in."

"We will be glad to have you go with us, Cody, for I was just starting to look up volunteers."

"Pardon me, but I prefer to go alone, and beg that you leave the matter to me."

"But, my friend, the boys—"

"Pard, let me whisper something in your ear, and I am sure you will allow me to do as I please in this matter."

As Bison Bill spoke he leaned forward and said something in a low tone, and it was evident that Boss Boniface was surprised, and convinced, for he said:

"Well, you can do as you please, for I have nothing more to say; only take care of yourself."

"Trust me for that, pard," reassured Bison Bill with a light laugh, and ten minutes after he rode away alone in the direction of Dead Man's Canyon.

And ten minutes after his departure a person followed on his trail.

That one was Edith Ford, mounted on a fine roan mare she had bought from "ther boss o' ther Palis," as "the boys" called Boss Boniface.

CHAPTER XVII.

A GIRL'S PLUCK.

AMONG the "baggage" which Bison Bill had brought with him to Beehive City, was a very handsome Texas saddle, horse-hair bridle and lariat, and, with these very necessary articles upon the border, he was not very long in finding a good horse to put them on.

With his hotel duties, Boss Boniface combined the business of horse-trading, and he had several very fine animals on hand, one of which he sold to Edith Ford for a good price, and a second, a dark buckskin with white tail and mane, which Bison Bill fancied sufficiently to pay a good round sum for.

Trying the animal he found him full of mettle, swift, and with bottom enough to last him many long miles over a hard country.

It was Buckskin Chief, as he named him, that he mounted and rode away to get the body of poor Halford, and it was Roan Rocket, her purchase from Boss Boniface, which Edith Ford had ridden on the trail of Bison Bill.

Bison Bill was certainly splendidly armed, and he looked like a man capable of rendering a good account of himself in any danger he might meet.

As for Edith Ford, she wore a handsome riding-habit of buckskin, elaborately beaded and trimmed with dyed quills.

It fitted her graceful form to perfection; the skirt was short and not burdensome, and with her slouch hat and plume, she certainly made a handsome equestrienne, especially as she rode as well as she drove.

Around her slender waist was a belt containing a pair of silver-mounted revolvers, and the reader has already seen that she had the pluck to use them.

"Strange that I should follow that man, Bison Bill," she muttered as she rode into the timber, several hundred yards behind the young horseman, and then, after a moment she added:

"But I cannot help it, for something tells me to do so, and that something I must obey; at least I will obey it, come what may."

Again she rode on in silence for a few minutes and then said:

"I fired to frighten him, for I cared not to kill him."

That she referred to her firing upon the Red Rider captain her next words proved, for, in the same half-aloud tone she muttered:

"I do not believe it was he, though there was something in the air and form like him; if it was, he has grown larger and stouter. Well, I shall soon know, for I will keep the oath I made on the grave that night, if I grow gray on the trail searching for him."

Feeling that she was dropping too far behind Bison Bill, she rode on at a faster gait, until she felt that he could not be far ahead.

But then, as she drew her horse down to a walk once more, she suddenly halted, for there was heard ahead of her a voice crying:

"Ha! ha! we have you now, Bison Bill."

There was no shot fired, no outcry, no answer to the triumphant words; but, without a moment's hesitation, Edith Ford urged her roan into a run, and keeping upon the mossy bank, dashed upon a scene where, at a glance, she saw the presence of a brave man was needed to help a comrade in distress.

Fortunately the mossy path deadened the hoof-falls of the roan, and none in the scene saw her until she dashed into their very midst, and with two well-directed shots dropped two men in their tracks, one of whom was evidently a dead man ere he touched the earth, for a bullet had pierced his brain.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN OLD GRUDGE.

THE scene that fell upon the gaze of Edith Ford was one that would have deterred many a bold man from breaking in upon.

But with a nature utterly fearless, a self-reliance that was remarkable, and a carelessness of consequences that amounted to recklessness, Edith Ford at once dashed forward to the aid of Bison Bill, who certainly needed that aid.

The road at that point wound around a rocky point of a hill, and half-concealed in the bushes two men had been seated, evidently having halted for a rest, as back in the little glen behind them their horses were feeding, held by lariats.

"Pard," said one, and whose face was full of cruelty, "I guesses we oughter be near ther city."

"Yes, it cannot be far away, from the account given us at the station we last left," answered the other.

This last speaker was a man of tall, sinewy form, had a slender waist, and broad shoulders, and every indication of possessing strength far above the average.

He was dressed in a suit of blue cloth, stylishly made, and ornamented with brass buttons, that gave him the look of a soldier; but the buttons bore no mark upon them to designate that he belonged to either army or navy.

His hat was a black slouch, encircled by a tarnished gilt cord, and his boots were drawn over his pants and armed with brass spurs.

Under his sack-coat was visible a belt of arms, and a pair of pistols were to be seen in the holsters of his saddle, their silver-ornamented butts glittering in the sunlight as the horse, a handsome sorrel, moved about in search of juicy morsels of grass.

The face of the man was a study, for the features were finely chiseled, the brow bold and full of intellect, and the eyes piercing and expressive, but upon all rested a mask of passions ungoverned, and their beauty was marred by dissipation and recklessness.

Yet he seemed to be proud of his personal appearance, as he curled his long mustache with his fingers one instant, and then passed his hand caressingly through his long dark hair, which fell upon his shoulders.

Where one man was little more than a brute in appearance, the other could have, if so he had willed, won the admiration of his fellow-men and women.

And yet the two were strangely alike in one thing, and that fellow-feeling held them together.

Need I say that this bond was in having devilish natures that were fully akin, the one to the other?

"Is yer sartin, cap'n, thet ther youth is at Beehive?" asked the rougher of the two men.

"Yes; or there is some one there strangely like him, and going under his name."

"Which name, cap'n, fer he has been called *Pi-e-has-ka* by ther Injuns, Buffalo Billy, and hes also ther handle o' Bison Bill."

"That is the one he is known by here, and it is Bison Bill you are paid to kill," was the stern response.

"Oh, I'll do it, cap'n; I loves ter let blood, ef ther pay is prime, an' I will say yer is generous; but does yer not heur a horse a-comin'?"

"Yes; some one is coming from the direction of Beehive City. Ha! there he comes, and, by the heavens above, it is Bison Bill!"

"Cap'n, we is in luck. I'll just take a bead on him with my rifle, and drop him slick as grease."

"No; I prefer to take him alive, and then, after I have toyed with him, as the cat does with the mouse, then I can kill him," and the face of the man was fiendish in its hatred.

"They say he are a screamer. We mout catch ther wrong feller ter play with, cap'n."

"I'll risk it. Move, and give me room to throw my lasso."

Silently the man obeyed, and a moment after the lariat was skillfully thrown, and the noose settled down upon the shoulders of the unsuspecting Bison Bill, and he was dragged from his saddle, falling heavily, as his frightened horse dashed forward.

With his arms pinioned as they were, and partially stunned by the fall, before Bison Bill could rise to his feet, his two foes had slipped down the rock and were upon him, and from the lips of one broke the triumphant cry that had reached the ears of Edith Ford.

"Kent Cameron, you have me at last," said Bison Bill, coolly, as he recognized who was his captor.

"Yes, and I intend to keep the oath I made to kill you, Buffalo Bill, for had it not been for you, I would have to-day been an honorable man, and been wedded to the one woman I ever loved," savagely said the captor, whom Bison Bill had called Kent Cameron.

"You lie, as usual, for you cannot tell the truth. You were a dishonored dog before I ever saw you— Ha!"

The latter expression escaped from the lips of Bison Bill as he suddenly saw a horse dashing up to the spot, and heard the ring of two shots.

It was Edith Ford, and in her sweet way, as she saw the two men prone upon the ground, she said:

"Well, Mister Bison Bill, you seem to be in trouble."

"No, Miss Ford, I am not in the slightest trouble, thanks to your timely aid," was the reply.

"You were ambushed, then?"

"Yes; and jerked from my saddle with this lariat with which I am bound. Had it not been for you, I would have been on my last trail, as that man would have killed me."

"You know him, then?"

"Oh, yes; he is an old foe. I kept him from marrying a lovely girl, by exposing his villainy, and he was dismissed from the army, in which he was a captain, and swore to kill me for having ruined him. It seems he passed in his checks first."

"You are a good shot, Miss Ford, but is it not dangerous for a lady to be riding so far from the town alone?"

"Not so much so, it seems, as for a man, as I have met with no danger; but stand nearer my horse and I will untie that lariat."

Bison Bill obeyed, but, finding the knots rather strongly tied for her dainty fingers to untie easily, she slipped to the ground, and used her sharp teeth, which had been the admiration of Burke Halford.

And thus bending down to her work, neither she nor Bison Bill saw one of the forms upon the ground noiselessly rise to his feet, and then as suddenly bound away.

Both heard him spring into the thicket, and

saw him disappear, and the maiden drew her pistol and sent several shots flying after him, while Bison Bill called to her to take his knife and sever the lariat.

This she did, and seizing his belt of arms, from where it lay upon the grass, having been thrown there by his captors, he darted up the side of the rock, just in time to see Kent Cameron mount his horse and ride down the glen like the wind, unhurt by the shots sent after him.

"He has escaped, and I have no horse to follow him," said Bison Bill.

"Take mine, or shall I give chase?" cried Edith.

"Oh, no; you have already placed yourself in too great danger. Ah, I forgot; this fellow must have had a horse," and Bison Bill again ran to the top of the rock, and caught sight of the animal that had belonged to the ruffian.

Instantly he approached him, and soon led him out into the trail.

"He is about on a par with his master, for he is a sorry beast," he said, with a smile.

"Hark!"

At the word from Edith both listened attentively, and heard a horse coming rapidly toward them.

"It may be Buckskin Chief returning. If so, something, or some one has started him back. Yes; it is my horse," and going forward, Bison Bill met the animal, and with little trouble caught him.

"Now, Miss Ford, I will follow on the trail of Kent Cameron, and I beg you to return at once to Beehive City, and tell Boss Boniface to send after the body of Halford, the driver, and why I did not go on."

"As they come by here they can put this fellow under ground, for he is human, and I don't wish the wild beasts to tear him in pieces."

Edith made no reply, and taking her silence as consent, Bison Bill mounted Buckskin Chief, and handing her the rein of the sorry-looking horse ridden by the dead ruffian, dashed away on the trail of Kent Cameron.

Watching him until he was out of sight, the maiden muttered:

"Now I understand the motive that prompted me to follow him, and I saved his life by so doing."

"But I'll not go back to Beehive City until I find out what was done with the body of that brave driver. Come along, sir, for I may need you," and dragging the led horse after her, Edith, with a shuddering glance at the dead body, rode on down the trail toward Dead Man's Canyon.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MEETING IN THE CANYON.

CONTINUING on her way, Edith Ford, after a ride of half an hour, and a thorough taxing of her patience to the utmost by the contrary disposition of the horse she was leading, arrived in sight of Dead Man's Canyon.

Wishing to be free for flight or fight, she tied the led horse to a sapling, and with her reins in hand, and a drawn revolver, rode cautiously forward.

Soon she came to the spot where she knew the stage had been halted, and drawing rein glanced searchingly around her.

But the place was still as the grave, and nowhere visible was the body of Burke Halford. Where could it be?

Had he not been killed, and managed to escape? she thought.

No, that was impossible, as she had seen him fall in a heap upon the backs of the wheel-horses, and then hurled between them, while she heard the heavy coach-wheels crushing over his body.

Had the Red Riders buried him? That was a question which search only would answer.

But why had they done so, when they seemed to be men without hearts?

Slowly she rode around in her search, and presently came to a halt at the base of a rock.

There in a mossy bank was a new-made grave, carefully shaped into a mound, and evidently the work of some careful hand, or a kindly one.

At one side of the grave stood a small tree, with smooth bark, and upon the trunk, skillfully cut out with a knife, Edith Ford read aloud as follows:

"BURKE HALFORD,

"A STAGE-DRIVER OF THE OVERLAND,
"Killed Sept. 5th 18—, by the Captain of Red Riders,

"And buried by

"The one that took his life,

"Who respected his unflinching courage.

"Peace to his ashes."

"Well, I am glad to see the Red Rider captain has a heart; it certainly cannot be the one I thought it was, for he showed no mercy," muttered Edith Ford, and then she sat in silence gazing sadly down upon the grave of the noble stage-driver, for if Burke Halford had a few faults, his virtues outweighed them.

Wiping away tears, that unbidden came into her eyes, Edith Ford turned her horse away from the grave and rode back toward where she had hitched the other animal.

"That grave, at the hands of a foe, is a more fitting tribute than a monument by the friends of poor Halford," she muttered, showing that her thoughts were still with the dead.

And thus lost in reverie she did not see a horseman who was crouching back against the side of a rock, hoping, seemingly that she would pass him by, for he had reined his horse back under the shadow of the cliff, and held him there motionless.

From his attitude it was evident that the coming of the maiden had surprised him too, for he had just descended the mountain side by a narrow path that led around the cliff, and to turn and fly would draw her eyes upon him, while he might avoid observation if he kept quiet.

One act of his was a strange one upon seeing the maiden, for he had started suddenly and turned deadly pale, while he dragged the rim of his hat far down over his eyes, at the same time thrusting forward a revolver as though to fire.

But the eyes of Edith Ford were as keen as an eagle's, and, in spite of her moody reverie, she suddenly caught sight of the dark forms of horse and rider.

The canyon was darkened by the overhanging rocks, with their heavy fringe of trees, and but dimly could she see that a foe perhaps was near, yet who, of course she could not tell.

Believing however, that it could be none other than a Red Rider, she put her hand upon her pistol, but hesitated at the stern command:

"Hold! woman though you are I will kill you if you draw that weapon."

"Who are you?" she asked with all the coolness she could command, though she refrained from drawing her pistol, seeming to understand that the man had made no idle threat.

"Who I am matters not to you; ride on, would you save your life," was the deep, stern answer.

"I would see the captain of the Red Rider outlaws," she said in a more even tone.

"Then seek him in his haunts," was the gruff response.

"Then you are not a Red Rider?"

"I am one who will kill you if you ride not on."

"As I care not to be shot down like a dog, and you have the drop on me, in frontier parlance, I will obey," she answered with spirit, and she moved her horse slowly forward, and as she did so, in vain tried to get a better glance at the horseman.

But the shadow of the overhanging rock, and a few leaves of a branch overhanging him, hid him quite securely and she kept on her way, evidently disappointed and angry with herself, as she muttered:

"I must keep my eyes open hereafter."

Unfastening the rein of the horse of the dead ruffian, she was determined not to be worried by leading him, so turned him loose, and drove him on before her on the trail back to Beehive City, the horseman under the shadow of the cliff watching her until she was out of sight.

Then he uttered a deep sigh and rode out into the canyon, while through his shut teeth came the words:

"Great God! what an escape, for that woman was Edith Balfour, for there is but one other face in the world like hers, and I know it is not that one."

"What can she be doing here, and alone, when I deemed her miles away?"

"By Heaven! she has but one motive in being here, and that is to track me down."

"But forewarned, is forearmed, and I will play a game to eucher her."

As the man said this he came more fully out into the glare falling through the top of the canyon, and the handsome face of Grit the Gambler was distinctly revealed.

CHAPTER XX.

ON THE WAR-PATH.

WHEN Edith had reached within a mile of Beehive City, she heard the clatter of hoofs, and at once was on her guard, for she knew not what danger she had to face.

But soon into sight dashed a party of two—

score horsemen, and at their head she recognized Boss Boniface of the Palace Hotel.

At sight of her they gave vent to three rousing cheers, and dashing up came to a sudden halt, while the Boss called out:

"We are after you, Miss Ford, and are delighted to find you."

"Thank you, Mr. Boniface, but I was not lost," she answered somewhat coldly.

"Well, we feared you were, as you got off very slyly and I did not know where you had gone, and fearing you might get into danger, the boys volunteered to come after you with me."

"It was very kind of you all, and perhaps foolish in me to go off by myself, but I am glad that I did so, as it has resulted in good, of which I will tell you."

In a few words then Edith Ford told the story of her two adventures, and was gazed upon by the rough party with undisguised admiration, while many a rude compliment, though not intended as rudeness, was bestowed upon her.

"Well, I declare you do beat all that I ever saw," bluntly remarked Boss Boniface, and he then proposed to ride on, bury the dead ruffian, take a look at Burke Halford's grave, and then see if the strange horseman seen by Edith in the canyon could be found, or any trace discovered of Bison Bill.

"I will go with you, if you please," said Edith.

"Yes, and be our captain too, miss, if you will."

"A couple of you boys start that devilish-looking brute on toward the city, and then overtake us: he may pan out half a hundred, Miss Ford, after I have had him a short time in my care," said Boss Boniface, referring to the animal of the dead ruffian.

The horse was started on the trail to Beehive City, and then the party went on at a gallop for the canyon, Edith and Boss Boniface leading and the others coming two by two behind, while the clatter of the horses' hoofs awoke many an echo in the mountains as they sped along.

Before very long the body of the dead ruffian was found, lying on the roadside where Bison Bill had thrown it, and some of the men dismounted to give it a hasty burial.

Among these was Nat Spencer, the Kansas friend of Bison Bill, and he seemed to at once recognize the dead man, for after calmly appropriating the contents of the ruffian's pockets, and which, by the way, panned out considerable, not to speak of a pack of cards and a flask of whisky as vile as the owner, he said, while looking at Edith:

"Miss, yer hes done ther country service, but hev disappointed ther hangman, fur I knows this feller."

"Who is he, Nat?" asked a number of voices.

"Waal, pard, his acquaintance hain't no honor ter me, I admit, fer he are Snoozer Dan, a outer-an'-outer desperado, ready to cut a throat or steal a gold mine, an' ther Lord be praised that he hev gathered him to ther devil: I guess he died hard, miss, fur he hev had a number o' wounds afore."

"No, I shot him in the brain, and he fell like a log; I fired also at the head of his companion," was the quiet reply of the maiden.

"Shot him in ther brain, did yer? Waal, ther hain't any brain oozed out o' ther wound, miss, an' it hain't likely he bed any."

"But, pard, ef yer hez thet grave dug, we'll consign him, an' don't hev it too deep, as ther devil will want him afore long; thet's it, now he's fixed until Gabriel toots ther risin' hymn: so mote it be, amen, an' thet are his fun'ral doxology."

And such was all the dead desperado received in the way of funeral services, for Edith had ridden on, having said to Boss Boniface, while the tears dimmed her eyes:

"It would seem like sacrilege for me, who killed him, to repeat the service over him; and yet I hate to see a human being buried as though he were a brute."

"He is worse, Miss Ford, for he had the form and gifts of a man, and descended lower than a beast."

"And yet, vile as he was, there is some one in all this vile world to love him," she answered, sadly.

"I doubt it, most damnably," muttered Boniface, but he kept the idea to himself, and rode on rapidly once more, while behind them came the miners at a swift gallop.

Arriving at the Dead Man's canyon, they found it as quiet as though no scene of death and devilry had ever marred the solitude of its

shadows, and, unable to find the strange horseman who had met Edith Ford, or to discover any sign of the Red Riders, they took a sorrowful look at the grave of Burke Halford.

"My durned eyes are so full o' water, miss, at seein' ther grave o' Burkie, thet I can't read what are wrote on thet tree," said Nat Spencer, who did not possess the gift of reading, anyhow.

Edith took the hint, and by reading the inscription aloud, relieved many a mind of the fear that they would have to own up to their ignorance, and confess they could not decipher the skillfully cut lettering.

"Waal, pard, old feller, we bids yer good-by, though we hates ter leave yer in yer cold bed."

"But I guesses yer is better posted than we be now, an' kin tell to the squar inch when we hed ter chip in."

"Good-by, pard Burke, an' ef they uses yer hard whar yer hes gone, tell 'em yer hes pards heur as will sw'ar fer yer thet yer was clean grit, straight as a arrer, and squar' to ther end."

Having delivered this parting address to the dead friend in the grave, Nat Spencer turned away, and the party dashed back toward Beehive City just as the evening shadows began to creep far across the valley.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TWO MOUNTAIN TRAILS.

WHEN the man whom Bison Bill had called Kent Cameron fell in his tracks at the shot of Edith Ford, he had not been seriously wounded, as the bullet had barely grazed his head, cutting a gash that was of little consequence to a person who daily gave and received hard knocks.

But as a blow of the fist will fell a man to the ground, so did the bullet, and for an instant he was stunned.

But Kent Cameron soon became conscious of what was going on around him, and determined to act accordingly.

A glance under his eyelids showed him that his companion, Snoozer Dan, as he was called by his comrades, was having his last snooze on earth, and if he showed signs of life, he would doubtless quickly follow his example.

A man to take desperate chances when there was anything in his favor, but very cautious of risking life, if the odds were against him, he bided his time, and determined to make a bold effort for escape.

The untying of the lariat with which Bison Bill was bound gave him this chance, and he was quick to take advantage of it.

At first he decided to boldly attack the maiden and the bound man; but then his pistols he had been cleaning, when he had halted to rest on the rocks, and the few cartridges he had replaced in the chambers he feared to trust.

His knife was at hand, it is true, but then Edith might shoot him, or release Bison Bill, and his great strength and prowess with a blade he well knew.

"No, I will escape and bide my time for another day," he muttered, and he at once set about making the attempt.

How he succeeded the reader already knows. Once on his own fine horse, and he was away with a speed that seemed to defy pursuit, escaping the shots sent after him.

But upon his trail soon followed Bison Bill, and he was as swift as a deer and as untiring and true to the scent as a bloodhound.

Although Kent Cameron had obtained quite a start, Bison Bill sped along in the direction by which his enemy had gone, and following him along the ridge of the mountain, suddenly drew rein at a point where the trail divided.

One went down one side of the mountain, and one down the other.

To find out which Kent Cameron had taken was the question.

Throwing himself from his horse, Bison Bill lay flat upon the ground, his ear upon the rocky trail, and listened.

"He has not gone this way," he muttered, and descending the mountain a few steps, he again tried the same plan.

"Yes, he has taken this trail, for I hear the rattle of hoofs against the rocks," he said, joyfully.

Mounting his horse once more, he set out down the steep trail, and felt that he was gaining upon his foe.

After a descent of a mile, he found the path narrowed to just sufficient width to permit his horse to pass, and that he seemed to be approaching the head of a deep glen, for there was a mountain opposite to him, and the valley narrowed as he went along.

Suddenly, in turning a sharp angle of a preci-

pice, he drew rein, forcing his horse back out of sight.

The objects which he saw that caused this maneuver were a horse and rider, and they were coming toward him.

It was not that he feared to meet them on that narrow shelf, for, though coming so as to meet him, the horseman was on the other side of the glen, and on a pathway as narrow as that upon which he stood.

A closer glance up the glen was sufficient to show Bison Bill that the path the other man was upon was the same he himself was traveling, only that it rounded the head of the glen, or canyon, and then gradually descended the side of the other mountain to the valley below.

Around the narrow shelf, the way by which Kent Cameron had gone, was half a mile, but across the glen, directly opposite to him, Bison Bill knew that the canyon was not sixty paces.

From his position behind the jutting point of the precipice, Bison Bill saw that he had his foe at his mercy, and he muttered, in a determined way:

"Now, Kent Cameron, either you or I take a life-jump from this dizzy height."

As he spoke, he unsling his rifle, and drawing back to the edge of the precipice, calmly awaited his time.

CHAPTER XXII.

A STRANGE DUEL.

Dismounting from his horse, Bison Bill leveled his rifle, and waited until the unsuspecting Kent Cameron came opposite to him, or rather reached a point where a few steps more would give him a position from which he could see him and his horse.

Then he called out suddenly, and in a tone that distinctly reached the ears of the man he addressed:

"Kent Cameron, you are at my mercy."

The gripe on the rein brought the horse to a sudden halt, and with pallid face and a hand on his revolver Kent Cameron awaited, for he saw the muzzle of the rifle pointing around the bend in the rocky path upon the other side.

"Well, who are you?" he asked as quietly as he could.

"I am one who has turned the tables upon you, Kent Cameron for I hold you in my power."

"Yes, with the aid of a girl; for I know now who you are, Bison Bill."

"I admit it; a girl saved my life: but I have followed you, and as I know that you have sworn to take my life, I shall end the suspense here."

"Would you kill me in cold blood?"

"No."

"You will give me a chance to meet you at another time?"

"No."

"What then?"

"You must meet me now."

"How can I?"

"I will tell you; you shall fight a duel with me."

"It is a long way around by the path to where you are, but I will come."

"You will not."

"I say I will."

"No."

"What then?"

"I will meet you where you are."

"Oh! you will come here."

"No indeed, for I know you, Kent Cameron."

"What would you do?"

"Meet you across the canyon."

"Bah!" said the other with a sneer.

"It is but twenty paces."

"Well?"

"You are a crack shot."

"But I have no rifle."

"Your pistol will do; mine will reach if yours does not."

"It will be nothing less than murder."

"You should not wince at that, for you are but an assassin."

"Curse you, Bison Bill, I will meet you; ay, with a knife."

"No, our knives will not reach across; besides, I will not trust you out of sight."

"Dismount, sir."

Silently the man obeyed.

"Now step away from your horse!"

Again he obeyed.

"Place your pistol at your feet!"

"What in the name of Satan do you mean?"

"Obey!"

"I will not."

"Then I shall put a rifle bullet in you."

"Hold! there is my pistol," and bending over he laid the revolver at his feet.

"Now, Kent Cameron, I could shoot you as you stand, for there is no one near to accuse me of murder."

"But I spare you, and give you a chance for life, though I know you have tracked me to kill me, and only to-day would have killed me, had you not been prevented by that noble girl."

"Curse you! act, and don't talk."

"Ah! I intend to act."

"Well, what is your intention?"

"To fight a duel with you."

"Bah!"

"A fair one."

"Yes; very fair."

"I mean it."

"Yes; with a rifle against a revolver."

"No; revolver against revolver."

"You concealing yourself behind that point of rocks."

"No; I am no coward."

"What else are you?"

"You shall see."

As Bison Bill spoke he stepped out from the shelter of the rocks.

Seeing this, Kent Cameron stooped quickly for his pistol.

"Hold! touch it and you die!"

He hesitated, still bending over, and his hand upon the weapon.

"Raise up, but leave that weapon where it is!"

With a muttered oath the man obeyed.

What else could he do?

"Now, sir, I will tell you my plan."

"I am listening, curse you!"

"I shall lay my rifle aside as I pick my pistol up."

"Well?"

"We will both stand erect, and I will give the word."

"What word?"

"Simply the word, *Now!*"

"Well?"

"At that word, both will stoop for their revolver and begin firing."

"You will not use your revolver."

"I will; for if I cared to use my rifle, I could do so now."

"You will not act fairly."

"Don't judge me by yourself, Kent Cameron."

"Well, I am ready."

"I am not."

"Why this delay?"

"I wish you to stand as I do, upon the very edge of the precipice."

"Why?"

"It will save burying the dead."

"And if one is wounded he will topple over and be dashed to pieces on the rocks two hundred feet below."

"So be it, for this is a fight to the death, Kent Cameron."

"Have your way, for I am in your power."

"I was in yours this afternoon, and would have received not one atom of mercy had you had your way."

"Nor shall you now, if I have the power to kill you, for I have not forgotten that you dishonored me."

"You lie! you dishonored yourself, and I merely told your commandant what I knew of you to prevent your marrying a young and innocent girl."

"Curse you, let us end this!" shouted the infuriated ex-officer.

"All right, sir; be on your guard—*Now!*"

At the word both men quickly stooped, and dropping his rifle from his left hand, Bison Bill quickly seized his revolver in his left and arose to a standing posture an instant before his enemy.

But so great seemed his desire for fair play that he waited a second for Kent Cameron, and the pistols flashed almost together.

A muttered curse broke from the lips of Kent Cameron at the shot, which showed he was hit, while his bullet flattened itself against the rock, not six inches from Bison Bill's head.

But instantly the revolvers cracked again and Bison Bill's hat turned half round on his head, as the bullet passed through it, while Kent Cameron sunk down upon the rocks, lying upon the very edge of the precipice, and his horse, alarmed at the shot, galloped away.

"A close shave for me, and death for him; but I must not let him remain unburied."

"Come, Buckskin, we will have to head this valley and save yonder fellow from the wolves," and picking up his rifle Buffalo Bill mounted his horse, that had patiently awaited him, and moved on up the narrow trail around the mountain-side.

CHAPTER XXIII.

INTO THE DEPTHS.

As Bison Bill approached the spot where he had seen the body of Kent Cameron lying, when last he looked back down the glen at it, he rubbed his eyes to see if there was not some mistake.

No, the body was not there.

What could it mean?

This question he asked himself over and over again, and no answer came to it.

Arriving at the spot he sprang from his horse and stood looking down upon the rocky path, where there was a red stain.

"Ah yes, he was not killed at once, and, in a dying agony has gone over the precipice."

"Yes, here is blood on the edge of the rock, and there is where his clothes rubbed it; I do hope he was dead before he struck the bottom."

Glancing over fearlessly he looked far down, and his eyes fell upon a deep pool of water just beneath his feet.

"Ah, he has fallen into that; well, it is better than being dashed to pieces on the rocks."

"Well, I will now look his horse up and then return to Beehive City."

So saying Bison Bill remounted and rode on down the narrow shelf path.

For some distance he went along, and then stopped at a sudden turn.

After attentively examining the rocks for awhile, he said aloud:

"I fear the horse has shared the fate of his master and gone over the precipice, for it looks as if he was going rapidly here, and, in trying to stop himself at this bend, was unable to do so and down he went."

"Yes, there is a piece of rock newly broken off by his hoof."

Leaning over Bison Bill examined the depths below, and added quickly:

"Why a stream washes the base of this cliff, and into it the horse must have fallen."

"But it surely killed him, and the swift current has carried him on down the valley."

"So be it; Kent Cameron and his horse are both gone."

With a sigh Bison Bill again mounted and continued on his way.

It was late at night when he rode into Beehive City, and after seeing that every attention was bestowed upon Buckskin Chief, that had done him such good service, he wended his way to the quarters of Spirit Dick.

His arrival was greeted with a shout of welcome, and a score of calls to tables rung in his ears; but he made his way over to where Boss Boniface and several others sat, and took a seat, calling for a glass of brandy.

"You look haggard, Bill," said the proprietor of Beehive Palace.

"I feel haggard, Boss," he said with a smile.

"Well, what luck?"

"If you consider it luck to kill a man, then I was lucky."

"Oh! you got him then?" and a number gathered around.

"Yes, he swore to take my life, because I thwarted him in some deviltry two years ago, and I have reason to know he was coming here on my trail."

"We met in a canyon in the mountains, he on one side and I on the other, and here is his first bullet, as flat as a half-dollar, and here is his second shot in my hat."

"And your bullet?"

"I shot for his heart," was the quiet reply.

"And found it too, I'll warrant," said Boss Boniface.

Bison Bill made no reply, but dashed off the brandy set before him, and rising, retired, with a simple "good-night to all."

A short while after, the others followed his example, for Grit the Gambler being absent, the gambling fever did not seem to run high, and Spirit Dick soon doused his light, and Beehive City went to sleep, excepting a few noisy prowlers, who preferred to make night hideous and sleep by day, and a fair sample of which nuisances can be found in every hamlet and city in the land.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A DEATH SHOT.

AFTER the surprise of his unexpected meeting with Edith Ford had died away somewhat, Grit the Gambler heaved a sigh of deep relief, and moved out of the canyon.

Evidently he had been making a search of the locality before, as he turned into a trail leading up into the mountains, and slowly pursued it for several miles.

At last he paused and muttered:

"Here is as far as I went before; dare I go further?"

For some moments he sat in his saddle, silently meditating, and then said abruptly:

"Yes, I will go, be the consequences what they may."

Again he rode on, his horse seeming to instinctively follow the trail, while his rider's thoughts were far away, as he muttered almost inaudibly:

"There is no place for her to have come from but Beehive City, and there I will find her if I seek her."

"But not as I am will I go; oh no, my fierce little beauty, with the revenge of an Indian beating in your heart, when next we meet you will not know me, but I will know you."

Again he rode on, for he had drawn his horse to a halt, as if moved by his feelings, and soon after came to a rocky canyon, leading into the mountains.

Here he paused and glanced cautiously around him, when all of a sudden there rode out of the canyon half a dozen horsemen.

One glance was sufficient to show him that they were Red Riders.

Another glance proved to him that he was greatly outnumbered.

One course was left for him to take, and he took it.

Drawing his revolver and firing upon the man nearest to him, he drove his spurs into his horse and started to fly.

But when his shot took effect, bringing the steed of the Red Rider to the ground, a shot from the enemy also brought down his steed, and he fell heavily, rolling half over him.

As soon as he could extricate himself from his stirrups, for he was not much hurt, he sprang to his feet and confronted the man whom he had dismounted, and who had rushed upon him.

A loud cry, like one of fright, broke from the lips of the Red Rider captain, for he it was, and he started back like a man about to fly for his life.

But Grit the Gambler fired, and the Red Rider measured his length upon the ground.

Then again did Grit the Gambler turn to fly, as he expected a rush upon him from the other Red Riders; but their horses had halted, and like statues they remained inactive, apparently awaiting an order from their fallen chief.

And another circumstance checked the flight of Grit the Gambler, and it came in a cry from the prostrate Red Rider captain.

"Stay! you are in no danger."

"I swear it."

Grit the Gambler paused, glanced at the silent mounted Red Riders, and then at their chief.

Then, as though having made up his mind, and with a revolver in each hand, he walked slowly toward the man his shot had brought down.

The Red captain raised himself slowly upon one elbow, and the effort seemed to give him great pain, for he groaned and gritted his teeth; but having gained an easier position, he said, savagely:

"Boy, do you know that you have given me my death-wound?"

"So be it; those who dwell along the Overland trail will rejoice," was the indifferent reply.

"Ever the same; heartless and cruel you will ever be, Allan."

The gambler started as his name was spoken, and asked quickly:

"Who are you that calls me by name?"

"This mask hides who I am."

"Shall I remove it?"

"Yes; but I warn you the face will startle you."

"I am no child to be frightened by a hideous face."

"Ha! ha! ha! boy, you are plucky, but I'll see you tremble when you look on me."

"Quick! remove this mask, for your bullet in my side renders me too weak."

In spite of his nerve the words of the Red Rider impressed him, and it was with some hesitation he stepped closer and undid the fastenings of the mask.

Then, slowly he removed it, and the cry that burst from his lips could have been heard far away.

"Ha! ha! ha! what did I tell you, boy?"

"Father! Good God! can this indeed be you?" groaned the young man, gazing with horror upon the face before him.

"Yes, I am Hugh Arleigh, your father, boy."

"Alas! I see it now; and you have come to this, father?"

"Why not?"

"A Red Rider."

"It is a case of like father like son; don't preach morality, Allan, for it does not set well on you," sneered the wounded man.

"My God! who would have believed it of you?"

"Bah! little did I believe that you, my son, would become as vile as you have become."

"Circumstances made me what I am."

"That is right, damn circumstances, when your own evil nature led you to the bad."

"It seems that I inherited it, when I look at you."

"By Heaven you did not! I was an honorable man until a short while ago."

"Then, to pay your gambling debts, and to save your neck from the gallows, I spent so much money I became cramped in business and failed."

"But I did not despair!"

"Oh no! I had pluck enough to seek the gold fields and go to work with pick and shovel."

"And you dug only earth and rock, so turned to robbing!" sneered the son.

"You lie, sir!"

"Ah! your wound is not mortal, I judge."

"It is, and I, your father, die by the hand of a son."

The gambler turned deadly pale, and set his lips, while his father continued:

"I found in the mines an old boyhood friend, and he shared with me his cabin and food."

"One day I struck it rich, and it gave me the gold fever, and I went mad, I believe."

"In that condition, wild at my rich find, my partner found me, and it crazed his brain too."

"He had worked for years in the mines and dug out only a pittance, while I had found a fortune in a few weeks."

"He remembered too that I was his successful rival in boyhood, and he seized me in his arms, carried me out into the black, storming night, and hurled me into a seething torrent."

"Instead of dying, strangled to death, the cold water revived me, and cooled my fever-racked brain."

"Then I made a struggle for life."

"I was a good swimmer, and at last I reached the shore, but utterly exhausted."

"Thus the following morning I was found by a Ute chief."

"Once in the mountains I had saved his life from some drunken miners, and he recognized me."

"Carrying me to his lonely tepee, for he had no kindred, he nursed me back to health."

"Then I became revengeful, for it was long months before I regained my strength."

"Seeking my false friend, I found that he had dug large quantities of gold from my mine, then sold it, and had gone to San Francisco."

"I had some little gold hidden away in a rock, and with this I went to the city, disguised myself, and paid a Mexican to aid me in my deadly work."

"But though I attacked him, and drove my knife into his breast, he did not die, and my Mexican tool was killed by a young man who came to his aid."

"I fled from the city, and almost moneyless and driven to desperation, I came here and turned to robbing the Overland stages."

"While your false friend revels in your wealth?"

"Yes, but I have seen him since."

"Where?"

"Right back yonder in my camp. I captured him, and though he had a fortune with him, I let him go."

"Strange."

"No; I made him sign a pledge to marry his daughter to my honorable son, your brother Edwin."

"Ha! they were lovers then?"

"No."

"What then?"

"The maiden never spoke to Edwin, but he saved her life, and learned to love her, and thus I do him one favor, and he gets Burt Bernard's property, which was mine, and a lovely wife, too."

"Ah! I see; you have provided well for my most virtuous of brothers."

"But what have you done for me?" and the face of the young gambler was black with jealous rage.

"I leave you my band of Red Riders."

"By the Lord! but I've a mind to accept my legacy."

"Do so, Allan, for your taste lies in the track of crime and dishonor."

"You are complimentary, father."

"I am truthful and just, my son."

"I believe you are right."

"You accept your inheritance, then?"

"Yes."

"Then blow on this whistle one long, loud blast of half a minute."

Grit took the silver whistle and obeyed.

Instantly it was answered by a distant war-whoop, and a moment after the Indian, Stinging Snake, came to the spot in a run.

"Chief, I have been wounded."

"Sorry; where Red Rider foe? I kill him."

"No, he has gone, and as I am dying, I wish to leave you to the care of my son."

"This white chief's son?" and the Indian looked fixedly at the gambler, who answered with a sneer:

"Yes, I have that misfortune."

Unheeding the insulting remark, Hugh Arleigh continued, in a low voice, for it was evident that he was sinking fast:

"Yes, Stinging Snake, he is my son, and he will be your chief, so tell him all that you know about the band."

"Oh, the Indian is your lieutenant, or aide, in preference to your white comrades; or are they all red-skins, as I cannot tell under their crimson masks?"

"The chief will tell you all; and tell you where the spoils of my robberies are hidden."

"I am glad to know the exchequer is not empty."

"No; you will have a good sum of money to gamble away."

"Now leave me with the Indian, for I have done my duty toward you."

"As you please; good-by, and present my compliments to my grandfather, the devil."

With a bitter laugh the young gambler turned away, and began to take his saddle and bridle from his fallen steed.

When he had done so and once more approached his father, he saw that he was dead.

He started back as he saw the sightless eyes staring him in the face, and for the first time remorse drove its poniard into his soul, and the iron entered deep.

Back through the vista of years he went, back to his happy boyhood, when that father had been all that a father could be to him, and with a groan of anguish, wrung from his inmost heart, he sunk down by the dead form and burst into tears.

CHAPTER XXV.

BISON BILL, THE PRINCE OF THE REINS.

WHEN the stage-horses were led out for the trip, the morning following the death of Burke Halford, the stable-boys stood waiting and wondering why no driver mounted the box.

It is true that Burke Halford and two other of the most popular manipulators of the reins had been killed; but there were others to take their places, and these were the ones who were wanted just then.

"Where is Steel-Grip Charley?" called out Boss Boniface, as the time passed for leaving.

"He hain't showed up, sir," answered a stable-boy.

"Well, where is Tim Luther?"

"He's missin' too, Boss."

"And Hank Hutchins?"

"Don't know, sir."

"Well, go after those three drivers and tell them I wish them to report here at once, as it was their duty to do, knowing Halford had been killed."

"Guess that's just the reason why," muttered a stable-boy, as he darted away to obey the bidding.

In a short while the three "extras" put in an appearance, sullen and disagreeable.

"Well, boys, I wish one of you to go out with this hearse, and it's already half an hour behind time," said Boss Boniface sternly.

Not one of the three answered a word, and the boss called out:

"Steel-Grip, you drive the trip."

"No, Boss Boniface, I isn't drivin' now."

"Not driving! what do you mean, sir?"

"Waal, I wouldn't be long, as I'd get my checks called in by the Riders."

"Ah! you are afraid to go?"

"That's about the size o' it, pard."

"And you, Hutchins?"

"Waal, Boss Boniface, 'taint my natur ter be disagreeable or skeery, but I is both jist now. fer I won't pull a ribbon," was the calm answer.

"And Tim Luther; what says he?"

"Them ribbon-pards o' mine are preachin' gospil, boss."

"You refuse too?"

"I does fer a fact."

"I'll give any of you a hundred dollars to run the stage through."

"Thet will jist about buy us a box fer bury-in," remarked Steel-Grip.

"Well, what sum do you want to make you go?" pettishly asked Boniface.

"I doesn't want no money, fer I is oncommon well fixed jist now."

"And I are wealthy."

"And I are healthy, an' I w'u'dn't be ef I cotch ther same disease our pards died of."

Such were the three answers, and in despair Boss Boniface turned to the crowd:

"Boys, the stage *must* go through, and I'll give any driver five hundred to jump her to the other end."

"Thar hain't no pilgrims goin', pard," said a miner.

"No, our list is light this morning."

"Yas, durned light; guesses I won't accept."

"What is the matter, Boss?" and just then Bison Bill came out of the hotel breakfast-room.

"The stage has no driver, Cody, and no man will go, as they fear the fate of Halford and the others."

"Why, I will go, with pleasure, if you will trust me."

"Trust you? indeed I will, and bravo for you, my brave boy."

The crowd joined in the cheer for Bison Bill's pluck, but many shook their heads dubiously.

With a smiling face Bison Bill drew on his gloves, mounted to the box, seized the reins, and asked:

"Passengers all aboard?"

"None going."

"All ready?"

"Yes; and an hour late in starting."

"I'll make up the time, with an empty hearse."

"Let 'em go."

The stable-boys sprung away from the bits, the whip cracked and the lash descended, and away went the coach on its outward run.

For a long time after the departure of the stage, the crowd stood around the hotel in earnest conversation, and then they were startled by a loud cry from one of the drivers, who had sauntered off to the point of the mountain, where a grand view of the valley could be seen, in all its rugged grandeur.

"Come! come, pards, an' see a sight as is suthin'," yelled Steel-Grip, almost beside himself with excitement, and in one mass the whole crowd rushed toward the point of the hill, which was several hundred yards in front of the Beehive Palace hotel.

As they gained the point all eyes were turned in the direction that Steel-Grip pointed, and a cry burst from every lip.

"It is Bison Bill!" cried Boss Boniface.

"Ther coach fer a fact!" yelled another.

"And ther Red Riders," shouted a third.

"Going down Breakneck Mountain he certainly is," responded Boss Boniface.

And it was no wonder that the crowd gave vent to amazed and excited cries at what they saw, for far away down the valley, descending a mountain side that had not been believed to be passable for other than mountain sheep, was visible the stage and its six horses.

And on the box sat Bison Bill, slowly but surely guiding the team down the fearful steep, while halted back on the mountain, seemingly not daring to follow, was a group of Red Riders.

"He saw the Riders in the canyon, and turned sharp off to the left and struck down the mountain," said Boss Boniface admiringly.

"Thet are so, pard, an' he hes over a mile o' road I didn't think ther devil's chariot could go down," put in Nat Spencer.

"It is a road, or rather hillside, I would not attempt to ride a horse up, let alone down," remarked a miner.

"And ther Red Riders hes backed, fer they hain't climbin' down," added another.

"No, but Bison Bill is nearly down and will make it; then he has level valley back to the Overland trail, and if he makes it, will do what no other man dare do," responded Boss Boniface.

"See how the coach sways and tips; there, one of his horses is down; no, he has recovered him," cried Edith Ford who had just arrived, and held a field-glass to her eyes.

"Yer is jist ther leetle gal ter wish yer was in the coach as a pilgrim," said Nat Spencer, politely and admiringly.

"No, not in the stage, but on the box with that splendidly daring man; but see, he is nearly down; there! he has reached the valley—bravo!"

But the voice of Edith Ford was drowned in the wild, mad, ringing hurrahs that burst from the excited crowd.

And, as the coach was seen to dash away down the valley, Edith cried out:

"There is the Red Rider captain waving his hat in admiration of the Prince of the Reins."

"Bravo for the name, Miss Ford; three cheers for Bison Bill, the Prince of the Reins," shouted Boss Boniface, half beside himself with admiration of the daring driver, and then, as the hoarse cheer died away, he called out:

"Now we'll drink to the Prince of the Reins; come!"

They went with a rush, and once in Spirit Dick's haunt, they shouted themselves hoarse, and drank themselves drunk in honor of the Prince of the Reins.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE RED RIDER'S SECRET.

It was with the utmost excitement that the denizens of Beehive City awaited the return of the coach, which Bison Bill, the newly-baptized Prince of the Reins, had volunteered to run through.

But had they seen that very daring and handsome young man seated upon the box, his reins well in hand over a fresh and exceedingly wild team, smoking a cigar, his very coolness would have allayed their excitement.

He knew that in suddenly wheeling from Dead Man's Canyon, and going down Break-neck Mountain, with a coach and six horses, he had accomplished a feat that might not be done again in a lifetime of trials.

Had he really known how fearful was the mountain to descend, he would rather have risked the Red Riders; but, once having started, he would not turn back, for it was his nature to keep on to the bitter end, did he once undertake anything.

But once down in the valley, he snapped his fingers at the Red Riders, and held on to the next station at a rapid rate of speed that brought him in nearly on time.

All he asked on the return trip was to select his own horses, and he got six that were as thorough devils as any Indian ever cared to own.

When he found that there were "no pilgrims going this trip," he seemed rather pleased, and set off at race-horse speed, to the delight of all who saw him depart.

As he drew near Dead Man's Canyon he threw away his cigar, laid a cocked revolver upon the box upon either side of him, and gathered his reins well in hand.

Entering the canyon he heard a shrill whistle, but kept on, and soon knew that there were horsemen behind him.

A glance over his shoulder showed that there were five.

Then ahead he saw a line of Red Riders, seven in number, sitting bolt-upright upon their horses, and barring his further passage.

But he did not stop, but held on at a swift gait, until suddenly out of the timber on the right of the canyon, rode a single horseman, and he sung out in distinct tones:

"Halt! or you die!"

But Bison Bill did not halt, nor did he die.

On the contrary he threw forward his right hand, with the quickness of the lightning's flash and down dropped the Red Rider's horse at the crack of the weapon, pinning the horseman under him.

And then, as the stage-horses bounded forward in wild fright, rapidly rattled forth the revolver shots, and every one brought down a Red Rider's horse, and over men and steed went the flying team and the heavy wheels.

For an instant the canyon was the scene of a wild death revel, and then the coach swept on at the full speed of its horses, and Bison Bill either knew it was useless to attempt to check them, or cared not to do so.

A hot, mad run, and at last he drew them up at the door of the Beehive Palace, and his ears were deafened by the cheers for the Prince of the Reins.

But, unheeding these, he called upon the crowd to mount their horses, and follow him, and ten minutes after, a motley cavalcade went sweeping down toward Dead Man's Canyon, and at their head rode Bison Bill, Edith Ford and Boss Boniface.

It was a long, hard ride, but at last they drew near the canyon. Many wished to halt for consultation, for they expected an attack upon the Red Riders; but Bison Bill held fearlessly on until just before them were visible half-a-dozen horses and forms lying on the roadside.

Then he halted and said, in his clear tones:

"Men, I was sent here as a detective of the Overland company, to hunt down the Red Riders, and I have done it."

"On my trip out I noticed, as I had before, one great peculiarity, and that was that the chief only spoke and moved."

"There, the secret is solved!"

He pointed to the dead forms, and riding forward, all uttered a shout, for, the supposed men were only dummies!

Upon each horse had been mounted a well-stuffed suit of clothes, and securely tied in the saddle and masked, they looked exactly like men, and the thoroughly-trained horses had carried them through every maneuver the whistle of their chief directed.

"But where is their chief?" cried Edith Ford.

"There lies his horse, but he has gone, it seems," answered Bison Bill.

"Gone he may be, but he shall not escape me, for I will still follow his trail," said the maiden with deep emotion, and she turned her horse back toward Beehive City, while the others went in search of the Red Rider's camp.

But, when they found it they discovered only other evidences of the skillful cheat practiced upon them by the Red Rider captain, of whom the denizens of Beehive City never again heard, and came to look upon him as having been wounded by Bison Bill and crawled off to some secluded spot to die alone.

CONCLUSION.

THE day after her return to Beehive City, after the solving of the Red Rider's secret in Dead Man's Canyon, Edith Ford, casting aside the love of Boss Boniface, left the little mining village, for parts unknown; but, taking an author's right, I will say that she kept her oath and followed the trail of Grit the Gambler to the bitter end.

As to Bison Bill, those who know the famous Buffalo Bill of to-day will recognize in him the daring Prince of the Reins.

Boss Boniface still keeps a hotel in the far West, and yet remains a bachelor, for he has never recovered from his love for Edith Ford.

Burt Bernard, the false friend, kept his pledge, made to Hugh Arleigh, the man he had wronged, and willed his daughter and his fortune to Captain Edwin Arleigh, but neither of the two young people knew the terrible secret of their strange betrothal, for upon his death-bed the millionaire, who believed himself a murderer, never revealed the dark pages of his past life.

Of Stinging Snake and Grit the Gambler, known as Allan Arleigh, nothing more was ever heard around Beehive City; they made good their escape, and their after career, with that of others of my story just told, may be followed in the sequel, "GRIT THE GAMBLER; OR, TRAILED WITHOUT MERCY."

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